The Story of St. Francis of Assisi

Frances E. Cooke

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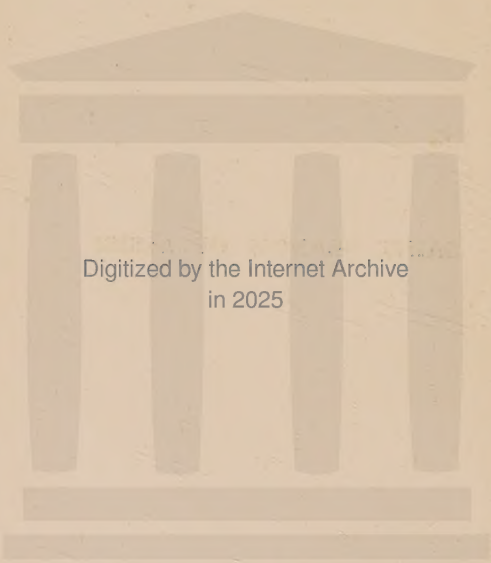
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SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Statue of St. Francis at Assisi.

THE STORY OF

Saint Francis of Assisi

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BY

FRANCES E. COOKE

Author of 'Story of Dorothea Dix,' 'Story of John Greenlea Whittier,' 'A Scottish Hero,' etc.

'Good for us, if we can, to set ourselves in imagination in the place of the heroes or saints of other days * * * * The one loyal tribute is to act, not as they acted, but as we believe they would act under our altered circumstances. It is only as thus used that examples can yield up the whole of their vast influence.'—*Prof. J. McCunn.*

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

My aim in preparing this little history of St. Francis of Assisi has been to introduce young people to the story of one who was devoted to the carrying out of a great ideal—the realisation of a Christ-like life. That he tried to imitate *literally* the deeds of Christ does not mar the beauty of his character. or diminish the worth of his example for us. Perhaps now, more than ever, we need the kindling influence of great aims and lofty ideals, and it would surely be well for ourselves and for the world about us if we were to try to carry the *spirit* of St. Francis into our daily lives.

Among the many biographies of St. Francis to which I am indebted for help in preparing this short sketch, I may specially mention that of M. Paul Sabatier, who has sought to present us with the simple story of the Saint removed from the setting of myth and legend—the natural and unavoidable overgrowth of the age in which he lived and of after times.

F. E. C.

Oxton, Birkenhead,
November, 1901.

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The Story of St. Francis of Assisi.

CHAPTER I.

BOYHOOD AND YOUTH IN ASSISI.

GOOD news greeted Pietro Bernardino, a wealthy Italian cloth merchant, as he rode up the steep side of one of the sunny hills, which sheltered the plain of Umbria, to the walled town of Assisi in which his home lay. Pietro had been travelling in France in search of costly stuffs to please the taste of the nobles in Italy, and the news he heard as he drew near his home again was that a baby son, only a few weeks old, was lying there in his cradle. The proud father urged his horse forward, and rode quickly through one of the ancient gates of the city, and along the narrow terrace-like streets till he reached the wide entrance of the warehouse which formed the ground-floor of his dwelling. The place seemed like a dark cavern as he entered it out of the bright sunshine.

This story takes us back more than six hundred years from the present time; yet if we were to go to Assisi to-morrow, we could easily picture what the place looked like, when, in the year 1182, Pietro rode so fast up its steep streets to see his baby son. Above the quaint old town, which climbed up the hillside, stood the castle, and between the castle and the town stretched green slopes where, among thick grass, bloomed wild flowers which the little children of Assisi loved to gather. Looking down from the walls and gates of the town, one could see, six hundred years ago, as now, a beautiful plain where streams flowed among woods and sunny meadows, while beyond the plain rose up sheltering hills, planted with vineyards and olive gardens, with walled towns, like Assisi, built upon their slopes, or crowning their summits.

In the twelfth century these hill towns were often at war with each other. Each was independent, a little power in itself. In Assisi, when the alarm of war came, the great bell of the cathedral was rung; and at the warning sound, the citizens would tramp out to defend their homes and do battle with the enemy in the plain below. But in times of peace, Assisi was a quiet old town, where women sat spinning at their doors; and troubadours (wandering minstrels from the South of France) came singing their sweet, gay songs; and children played safely in the middle of the quiet, narrow streets.

There were great rejoicings in the cloth merchant's home when the baby had a name given to it. At its birth, the mother had called it Giovānni; but Pietro, who was a self-willed man, declared his boy should bear the name of Francis, in honour of the land of France where he had made most of his wealth. Many were his day dreams about the future of the little one. Francis was to become a a trader in cloth and velvet like his father; he was to be skilful in making good bargains, and was to raise his family to a great position in the town. Pietro Bernardino loved wealth and station more than anything else in the world.

Time passed, and the little Francis Bernardino in his boyhood was like a prince among the other children of Assisi. He led their games; where he went, they followed. None of his playfellows were so richly clothed as he, and none of them possessed so beautiful a voice. He learned to sing the Troubadour songs, and the people of the town used to stop their work, and stand at their house doors, to listen as he went past, with a little train of children following him, singing as he went. Latin was spoken in Assisi, and Francis was taught to read it by the priests, but he scarcely learned how to write. The Provençal language, which he learned from his mother, was far dearer to him than the Latin tongue. Madonna Pica, as she was called, used to tell her boy stories about the knights and heroes in the poems of Provence; and one

reason why he liked to sing the minstrels' songs was that they were written in the language of Provence.

The boys, who had been the playfellows of Francis in his childhood, still made him their leader when they all grew older. His foolish father was proud to see him in the company of the young men of high rank in Assisi, and they willingly paid court to the wealthy merchant's son whose purse was never empty. Francis had no need to ask for rich clothing, it was heaped upon him by his father. He had money given him to spend as he choose and freedom to do as he liked. He was fond of splendid clothes, and gay tournaments, and used to give grand feasts to his companions, heading the table in his brilliant, fantastic dress and leading them out afterwards, a merry band of revellers, singing gay songs in the night time till the quiet old streets of Assisi rang again. Francis might have seen strange contrasts to his mode of life close to his own home. In the plain below Assisi lay a hospital for lepers; and travellers in the unfrequented roads used sometimes to meet the wretched sufferers hurrying along as fast as their poor crippled, withered limbs would bear them. Among the hills, were starving peasants ruined by war or bad harvests, but Francis lived in a gay world of his own and turned his thoughts away from the troubles of his fellow-men.

Yet with all his merrymaking he did not alto-

gether neglect his father's business. At one time, he seemed to promise to become what Bernardino hoped he would be, a clever merchant. He was sometimes to be seen selling the beautiful silks and velvets to customers in his father's warehouse, or attending fairs in one or another of the neighbouring walled towns. But the love of excitement and pleasure grew upon him more and more and Pietro and his wife watched their son with wonder.

'What will be the end of it?' the parents asked each other when they heard the stories about his spendthrift ways which were repeated to them by their acquaintances in Assisi. Yet the foolish father was proud of his well-dressed, graceful, idle heir, and he used to say boastingly 'Francis is like the son of a prince, not like our son.' His neighbours heard the silly speech, and rehearsed it to one another, laughing scornfully at the folly of Pietro Bernardino, who was no favourite among them; but they had only kind words for Francis, who was always courteous, and often showed that he had a tender heart behind all his senseless waywardness. Madonna Pica, wiser than her husband, grieved over her boy and longed to see a change in him. More than once she was heard to say to the gossips who came to tell her the idle tales they had heard—'If Francis lives like the son of a prince now, yet in time, if it please God, he will become a good Christian.'

And indeed, at times, a voice began to whisper

to him that life was passing quickly and that he was making a bad use of it. Hoping to silence his conscience, by way of penance, unknown to his companions, he had some of his fine garments lined with coarse, harsh stuff which chafed his tender skin. It was his nature to be kind and generous, and if, at any time, it seemed to him that he had been hard to any one in trouble he hastened to atone for what he had done or failed to do. But he acted from the impulse of the moment, not from steady principle and from a constant wish to do what was right.

One day, Francis was in his father's warehouse showing some goods to customers when a miserable looking man came in and begged for charity in the name of God. Francis would have nothing to say to him, and with hasty words sent him away. The moment after he repented. 'What would I not have done,' he thought, 'if that man had asked something of me in the name of a Count or a Baron? What ought I not to have done when he came in the name of God? I am no better than a clown!' and he threw down the costly velvet he was holding to hurry after the man and give him money. He did not stop to consider whether there might not be some better way of helping the beggar. Thus, we must picture him careless and pleasure loving, impulsive, sunny-hearted, and ready with kind words and courteous greetings. There is one thing more to say; if ever the thoughtless youths

who followed him as their leader suggested some course of action that was not pure and good, Francis turned from the tempter at once. We are told that he was idle and careless but that vicious thoughts had no place in his mind.

Francis had passed his twentieth birthday, when a sudden excitement broke out in Assisi. Among the towns on the hill tops in Umbria, all of which were so ready to go to war with each other, there were no greater enemies than the cities of Perugia and Assisi. A dispute arose between them in the year 1202, and, at the summons of the great alarm bell, the citizens of Assisi hurriedly left their business, and the narrow streets soon resounded with the clanking of armour and the prancing of horses, with the loud shouts of men and the cries of frightened women. Soon everyone learned that war had been declared against Perugia, and down the hill side to the chosen battle field in the plain below rode the armed knights and their followers—the gay colours of fringes and banners shining in the sunshine; and among the warlike company rode Francis Bernardino. His father and mother, among other people, watched the little host from the walls until they were out of sight, and then went home with anxious hearts to wait for news of the battle. The Perugians were victorious, and among the prisoners carried off the field was Francis, who was confined in a gloomy dungeon with some of his companions in arms.

A dismal company they were, with the exception of Francis. With the joyous Troubadour songs in his memory, he filled the prison with his beautiful voice; keeping the prospect of a happier future in view, he never lost hope. His fellow-captives wondered how he could retain his sunny-heartedness, and could sing in the midst of such misfortune. Some of them thought him mad; others called him callous and unfeeling, and when he persisted in befriending one among the number whom they all disliked and ill-treated, they would have quarrelled with him, if it had been possible to continue angry with one who was always kindly and courteous.

It was a long imprisonment—a whole year. At length, the dungeon gates were opened, and Francis was back in sunny Assisi, where his old life began again. So we may picture him once more presiding at merry feasts, among the gayest at tournaments, and at the head of his band of followers singing his minstrel songs in the streets and over the hill slopes. So time passed till he was twenty-five years old. Then it happened that one week the merry-makings were more brilliant and numerous than usual. When they were over, Francis fell ill. For many weeks, he lay between life and death. At length, he recovered so far that he was able, by the help of a crutch, to drag himself slowly to a spot out of doors whence he could look on the beautiful hills lying in bright sunshine

before him, and down upon the Umbrian plain with its meadows, streams, and woods. Grave thoughts, such as had filled his mind at times during his illness, crowded upon him. He looked back with disgust on his empty, frivolous life. From this time he would turn to something better, and he began to think in good earnest what higher aims he could set before himself. This was no passing fancy. When health and strength returned to him, he was still of the same mind.

Now those were days when Europe was overrun by hosts of crusaders, when praises of deeds of chivalry were loudly sung, and it was the highest aim of many a noble youth to go forth to battle and prove himself a brave warrior for what he thought was a great cause. Francis shared the views of people of his own time; and when he heard that an Umbrian knight was on the point of marching with an army to help a Count in Southern Italy who had been unjustly deprived of his inheritance, it seemed to him that the best thing he could do was to give up his idle life, provide himself with a horse and armour, and enrol himself among the followers of the knight.

The cloth-merchant was well pleased with his son's decision. It was his greatest wish that Francis should win fame and worldly honour, and he gladly provided him with all he needed.

The night before the young soldier left home to join the army, he had a dream. It seemed to

him that he stood before a beautiful palace, the gates of which were wide open. He entered, and found the palace walls hung with gorgeous banners and weapons, on every one of which was carved a cross. Suddenly, he heard a voice which told him that the palace and all it contained was for himself and his soldiers.

'I shall become a great prince,' cried Francis joyfully, when he woke, and the next morning he set forth full of hope, believing that he was fulfilling a call from Heaven. Excited and eager, he rode on his way. He was ready to believe in any omen, and to find in every dream a message from on high. He was really longing to mend his ways, and lead a better life; but as yet he was only blindly feeling after the right path. Next night, still on his way to overtake his future companions in arms, he rested at the town of Spoleto; and there he had another vivid dream. He thought a voice spoke to him, as on the former occasion, and told him that he had mistaken the meaning of his earlier vision; that he must return to his own home and there he would hear what the Lord would have him do.

Impulsive Francis longed most earnestly to follow the right leading. By dawn he had changed his plans. He mounted his horse and rode back over the plain, up the hill side, and through the narrow streets of Assisi, where in the evening light the neighbours came out from their houses to mock

at the young warrior who was back so soon from the war. At home, he met with stern rebuke and harsh words from his father; for Bernardino's pride was hurt. It enraged him to know that the people of Assisi were laughing at his son's fickleness.

Henceforth, Francis was like a different man from his old self. He still was to be seen at times in his father's warehouse, and still at times went with his old companions when they came to see him; but he was no longer the merry king of their revels. One night a grand banquet was held, and he sat in his old place at the head of the table; but he was wrapped in his own thoughts, and silent. Laughing, jesting, and singing went on around him unnoticed; at last, his guests tried to rouse him from his reverie, with cries of 'What ails you, Francesco?' They could make nothing of their old leader, and when they rose, as usual, to go singing through the streets in search of some fresh source of merriment, he shrunk away from them and disappeared under cover of the darkness. How could he explain his changed thoughts to them. He could not make them understand why he no longer cared for their gay doings, nor for wealth, nor for the promised honours of a warrior's life.

CHAPTER II.

THE RUINED CHAPEL OF ST. DAMIAN.

FRANCIS BERNARDINO began to lead a very lonely life. The cloth merchant's worldly hopes for his son were disappointed, and his anger was so violent that there was no longer any peace at home. Francis used to take long solitary rambles that he might think out some new plan of life, and often wept bitter tears in sorrow for the years he had wasted. In his walks he met with peasants living among the hills, some of them in great need; for their homes had been in many cases ruined by the wars that were so frequently carried on among the various hill towns of Umbria. There were olive growers, too, who were in trouble because of bad harvests; and he went among them, not only with gifts of money, of which he had still a great store at his command, but with kind words and sympathy. These unhappy people were overwhelmed with gratitude, and ready to do any service they could for him whom they began to look upon as a dear friend.

It happened about this time that Francis paid a visit to Rome. The reason of his going there is not known. As he went in and out of the cathedral he saw constantly groups of miserable beggars standing on the steps holding out their hands for gifts from the passers by. He watched the rich people placing their offerings on the altars, and was filled with wonder at the trifling sums they gave for such a purpose. Thrusting his hand into his purse he threw a handful of money through the railings of a side chapel. The coins rolled upon the marble floor, and he hurried away out of observation to the open air, where he again saw the beggars and was struck with shame at the contrast between their rags and his own silk and velvet clothes. With one of the sudden impulses which governed him in those days, he borrowed the tattered covering of one of the beggars and gave him his own sumptuous garment in exchange. Then, all day long, he stood fasting in the burning sunshine, begging with outstretched hands, that he might learn to understand what outcasts, such as these, suffered.

A still stranger story, as it seems to us who live in such very different times, tells us that he was out riding one day at the foot of the hill on which Assisi lies, when he met a leper limping along unfrequented ways—a ghastly sight—from which Francis, who had always had a great horror of leprosy, shrank back appalled, turning his horse

aside. He only rode a few steps, however, and then came the thought to him, 'Is this what Christ would have done?' Springing from his horse he hastened back to the leper, not only forcing money upon him but grasping his poor, withered hands and pressing kisses upon them.

In his long, lonely rambles Francis used to come, at times, on some one of the many little half-ruined chapels that stood here and there by the roadside in the beautiful country. The doors of such buildings were always open, and each day a priest said mass there, a tired wanderer, now and then, being the only worshipper. What quiet refuges did these little simple shrines seem to Francis, and when the priest read the gospel for the day he listened to the stories of Christ's loving life among men, and the words sank down deep into his heart. Thus it was that he began to ask himself at times the question as he went about day after day—'Is this what Christ would have done?' and, as he sat for hours in a cave on the hillside, or wandered in the woods above Assisi, he used to meditate on the gospel stories and long to follow the example of Christ and live a life of loving service among men. Never again could he go back to his old life, and yet his new pathway was not clear.

Francis became worn and thin. He was so changed in appearance that his old friends scarcely knew him. 'The promise of his youth is gone,'

said those who had been his most ardent admirers. His angry father upbraided him, telling him that none of his hard-earned money should go in gifts to beggars, though it might be spent to any extent in the company of the gay young nobles whom Francis had forsaken. Life at home became unbearable. His entrance was the signal for passionate words and even curses, by which Pietro Bernardino thought to drive his son back to his unworthy associates.

What was to be done? On the hills of Umbria stood monasteries and rich abbeys where men could find peaceful refuge from the sorrows and strifes of the world. Their doors stood open to those who liked to enter in, but such a shelter was not what Francis sought. He wanted to live among his fellow-men as a helper and to do what he could to heal the misery in the world; in fact he longed to try to live in Italy as Christ had lived in Palestine. But how to begin to lead such a life? that was the question; and Francis did not know where to turn for help in his trouble.

Now in the plain just below Assisi, hidden away in a thick grove of olive trees, there stood a little half-ruined church dedicated to St. Damian. It was so old that no one knew when it was built. Rarely did any pilgrim follow the narrow track which led to it through the trees. The stony walk was in places almost overgrown by bushes, yet *there* lived a priest as guardian of the place. For within

the broken walls was a simple altar, while above the altar hung a crucifix, and the old priest each day said mass, though seldom any worshipper beside himself was present.

Francis found this forgotten church a refuge. He used to spend hours there praying for guidance in his life; and one day he gave the priest all the money in his purse to pay for a lamp which should be kept alight on the altar. Day by day, this ruined chapel became dearer to him; and as he gazed up into the gracious, tender face that looked down upon him from the cross, it seemed to him that a voice spoke from heaven telling him to use his strength in restoring the old ruin and building it up again into the house of God.

If we look back over those long centuries and picture Francis in his surroundings, which were so different from our own, with aspirations and an ideal that he had seen no way hitherto of carrying out, we shall understand how, filled with this new thought, he sprang up eager to obey the call. In those days, any one who wanted to lead a 'religious life' became a priest, entered a monastery, joined the crusaders, or built a church; so this idea of restoring the broken down shrine was connected in his mind with all that was best in the life of the time.

Without waiting to consider the matter any further, with his usual impetuous zeal he hurried up the hill to the warehouse and chose out a rich

bundle from the store of costly cloths which his father had always encouraged him to use as lavishly as he chose during his past gay life. Then off he rode on his horse, with his precious burden before him, to attend a fair which was just then being held in a neighbouring town. He sold his horse and stuffs, and came back at night with a purseful of gold which he handed joyfully to the priest to be used for the restoration of the church.

But the priest, much to the surprise of Francis, refused the offering. He knew well the character of Pietro Bernardino, and dared not risk the anger which he believed would follow his discovery of this rash but well-meant deed. Poor, disappointed Francis tossed the purse up among the loose stones of an old window ledge, and gave himself up to the deepest grief.

In time, Pietro heard of his son's visit to the warehouse and journey to the fair. In great rage he traced him to the ruined church among the olive trees, where the priest, who had begun to love his homeless visitor, was giving Francis shelter both day and night. Suddenly, the quiet of the place was disturbed by loud voices and hurrying footsteps, by the breaking of branches and the fall of crumbling stones. Pietro, with a troop of his neighbours, appeared at the church door. Francis, anxious to save his friend the priest from any share of blame, had just time to hide himself in a dark vault beneath the building, and after a vain search the noisy band withdrew.

Perhaps the priest's rebuke, or the knowledge of his father's anger, or the failure of his hopes—perhaps all these causes combined—led Francis, after a few days' consideration, to look upon the sale of the cloth in a different light, and he resolved to go home and face the consequences of his deeds.

News spread quickly as he entered Assisi that the young madman, as his fellow-townsmen began to consider him, was returning home. People hurried out of their houses to look at him, and the children, sharing in the general excitement, hooted and threw stones as he passed. Pietro came forth storming to capture his prodigal son; and, dragging him into his own house, secured him in a dark closet regardless of the worn, wan looks of the once buoyant, handsome youth of whom he had been so proud.

This would probably have been a long imprisonment, but fortunately the cloth merchant's business took him from home; and, during his absence, Madonna Pica set her son at liberty, and besought him to take refuge again in St. Damian's church. She, poor woman, suffered from her cruel husband's anger when he came back. Then he straightway went down to find Francis and abuse him afresh for all that he had cost him, and ended by casting him off for ever. Francis pointed to the purse of money lying on the window ledge; Bernardino seizing it, went storming away through the grove.

Now comes the history of a strange scene. Pietro Bernardino, like other prosperous merchants in those days, was a man of good position in Assisi, and he appealed to the Bishop of the town to use his authority to force Francis back into the life he had forsaken. The Bishop saw into the evil, sordid heart of Bernardino, and pitied Francis, of whose sufferings he had heard. Father and son were summoned to appear before him on the Piazza in front of the Cathedral. A crowd of people assembled, and the excitement was great, for though they hated the proud, insolent merchant, they believed that his son was mad. The Bishop set forth the case, doubtless blaming with stern words the behaviour of Bernardino. His speech to Francis is preserved. While he told him that he had no right to the money gained at the fair, and must restore it if he would serve God, he gave him his blessing, and added, 'My son, have faith and act like a man. Be not afraid. God will help you and give you all that is necessary for the work of His Church.'

'Not only the money,' cried Francis, 'but all else that can be called his, even the clothes he has given me, I will restore. Bear witness, all present, from this time I am the servant of God. Henceforth, I will only say my Father which art in Heaven, no more my father Pietro Bernardino.' Amid the deep silence of the crowd he cast off the garments he would never wear again, keeping

only the hair shirt he had worn beneath them. The frock of a poor labourer was found for him, and bare-footed he went forth on to the snow-covered hill-side, while the people of Assisi with indignation watched Pietro carrying off the clothes, and went back to their homes to talk over the strange story, and mourn the hard fate, of the youth who had grown up in their midst.

Meanwhile, Francis climbed up Mount Subasio, which rises above the hill whereon Assisi is built, and made his way into thick forests, singing as he went the sweet minstrel melodies which he had always loved so dearly. For his heart was full, and he found relief in song; but the sound of his voice brought a band of ruffians upon him, who, enraged that he had nothing upon him worth stealing, robbed him of his poor labourer's frock, cast him with mocking words into a ditch, and went off in search of prey better worth having.

Stiff with cold and bruises, Francis scrambled out of the snow and made his way, still singing, to a monastery on the mountain side, where he presented himself at the gate the most wretched wanderer who ever asked for alms from the monks. They took him in and clothed him in a coarse habit, fastened by a knotted cord round his waist. With a joyful spirit he did the most menial work for the brethren, thanking God continually that He had opened a new path before him in which he might serve men. And now hear what his

next step was. With the abbot's leave he, by and by, said good-bye to the mountain monastery and went to take up much harder work. With empty hands, but with a heart overflowing with pity, he made his home in a leper hospital. With tender care he nursed the wretched sufferers and washed their sores, and so great was the influence of his bright, loving spirit that their pains lessened in his presence, and it seemed as if a healing power went with him.

We cannot hope to understand, or care to read, the wonderful life that Francis led six hundred years ago in Italy unless we carefully bear in mind that his circumstances, the people he lived among, their thoughts and ways, and the customs of the times, were all totally different from anything we are used to. We must endeavour to discover how the beautiful character grew up within him which made the ignorant, simple-hearted man into a saint, and out of the true story of his life, which is so mixed up with strange legends, we must try to get a clear idea of the inward spirit which ruled his life, a spirit which in our own way in our very different circumstances we may bring to bear upon our lives to make them more what they ought to be. Though we cannot imitate his deeds, we can cultivate somewhat of his spirit.

And now his story takes us back again to Assisi and the little ruined church of St. Damian. Francis could not forget the day when as he knelt

there in prayer he thought he heard a voice tell him to rebuild the broken walls. It was true he had now no money, but had he not strength of body? And so it came about that bare-footed, in his coarse hermit's dress, he went back into the town, singing hymns with the same beautiful voice that the people had known so well in past times. When they gathered round him in the squares and open spaces he told them that he meant to restore the old church in the plain below, and asked them to bring him stones to help him in his work, promising them, with gentle words, that they should have their reward hereafter.

How strange it all seemed to them—the change in his appearance and the request he made. Some laughed, and mocked, and turned away, but we are told that, in time, reverence for him and a kind of awe spread among the people. Some were deeply touched and even shed tears when they saw him carrying the heavy stones upon his shoulders, bowed down by their weight. And, in truth, it was a mighty task to undertake, though the building was very small. His strength threatened to give way sometimes; then, panting and weary, he would merrily scold his body, calling it 'brother ass' and urging it to new efforts.

The poor priest of St. Damian knew the whole story of his life; and being a kind hearted old man with a great affection for Francis, he puzzled himself greatly to find some way in which he could

bring into his hard life some little touch of the comforts to which he was once accustomed. It seems both ludicrous and pathetic to hear that the priest tried to make little dainty dishes of food that should tempt the wearied builder to eat; but Francis gently declined these kind attentions; and, in order to save his poor host any expense on his account, he used to beg at cottage doors for the crusts and leavings that might feed the animals, saying that the labourer was worthy of his hire. The thought of duty, of what was right for him to do, made Francis brave enough to undertake the most distasteful tasks; for instance, though by his own labour he could carry stones to rebuild the ruined walls, money was needed to complete the restoration of the church, and one way in which he could probably get sums for this purpose was by making a visit to the banqueting hall where he used to be the leader of the revels, and asking his old companions to give him some of the wealth they squandered so recklessly.

Little did the merry-makers in the brilliantly lighted hall think who stood outside, one evening, barefooted, in poor coarse dress. They were singing, and Francis recognized the voices of his old friends. His courage failed, he could not go in to beg and he turned away into the darkness again. A minute later he was ashamed of his cowardice, and turning back, he entered the room. A singular meeting! many light, careless hearts were

deeply touched by his earnest words, as with his old charm of manner he persuaded them to help him. See what a wonderful influence he had. We are told that during the long months while he was about this work he charmed people so much by his kindly, courteous ways, and his beautiful singing that many willingly helped him. One sad exception there was. Pietro Bernardino never met his son without cursing him. Francis felt severely the continued anger of his father, and the old priest, his friend, knew well what was troubling him when the young man said to him at times 'my father, give me a blessing.'

CHAPTER III.

THE FOUNDING OF THE BROTHERHOOD.

A SHORT distance from Assisi, hidden away in a wood on the Umbrian plain, stood another tiny ruined chapel, which was known as the Portiuncula. It is still to be seen with its pent roof and round arched doorway (though a great church is built above it now), and many memories of Francis, as we shall see, are connected with it. When he had finished restoring St. Damian he set to work to rebuild the crumbling walls of the Portiuncula. For many months, he again urged 'brother ass' beyond his strength to carry heavy stones until this new task was done. Then at the end of the year 1208 Francis took up his abode for a time in this little church and waited there in prayer and meditation for some new call of duty. He was very happy in his solitude, which was only broken by the occasional visits of a priest who came down from the Abbey on Mount Subasio to say mass in the restored building.

One day the priest reading the gospel for the

day when Francis was the only worshipper, came to these words:—'Wherever ye go, preach, saying the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils. Freely ye have received, freely give. Provide neither silver, nor gold, nor brass in your purses, neither scrip nor two coats, nor shoes nor staff, for the labourer is worthy of his meat.' As he listened church and priest were both forgotten by Francis and the words came to the ready, waiting mind like a message straight from Heaven. 'This is what I am seeking, this is what I want,' he said to himself again and again, as he spent the night in thinking over the words of Christ, 'I will spend my strength henceforth in putting it in practice.' Next morning he went up the hill to Assisi, and began to preach.

Now let us try to fancy the scene which took place there. Such an experience was new at the time to the people; and it seemed all the stranger because the open air preacher was one who had been born and brought up in their midst in very different circumstances. 'The peace of God be with you' was always the opening of each sermon; and then, as the little crowd began to gather round him, he went on in simplest words to speak of the shortness of life, of the need that each one should turn away from all wrong doing. As he spoke to them of the life of Christ that had so touched his own soul, his words, simple as they were, moved his listeners deeply, and, with the ready excitement

of Italians, affected by the wonderful personal influence that lay behind the preacher's words, many of them were ready on the spot to promise thenceforth to try to lead better lives.

We must bear in mind that in the thirteenth century when these events took place a great religious movement was exciting Europe. Pilgrims would go far to see relics and to worship at shrines which were held to be specially sacred. Thinking to serve God, men would arm themselves and go over land and sea as crusaders to win the Holy Sepulchre in Palestine from the Saracens. Out of the heart of the people came this, so called, religious excitement, and their emotion was easily aroused. In those days, even children, a huge band of innocent, young creatures, set forth from the northern countries in Europe to help, as they hoped, to deliver the Holy Land. They never saw homes nor friends again, and they certainly never reached Jerusalem. Thus we can understand how natural it was at that time that the citizens of Assisi should flock to listen to this bare-footed preacher, though they did not hear from him brilliant, startling orations, but only simple, loving words that touched their hearts and conscience. Then, too, we must remember that his influence over them was great because of what he was. They had watched him for two years patiently doing the work to which he thought God called him, bearing no ill-will for cruel treatment, always kindly and courteous, and

joyous in the midst of his poverty and trials. Thus the power of his character acted on them.

Yet, no doubt, the news was startling, when it was told in Assisi that a wealthy resident had really resolved to cast in his lot with the preacher and follow him as his disciple. This man's name was Bernardo di Quintavalle. He was not only rich, but of noble birth, and in his younger days had been a companion of Francis. A hidden germ of goodness within him was touched and wakened into life, as he heard his old comrade's words, and watched his constant patience and readiness to help his fellow-men. In that old Italian town, six hundred years ago, it was as true as it is in England now, that a man's conduct never failed to affect those around him. Character then was, as it has always been, the strongest power in the world. To prove his sincerity, Bernardo gave away his fortune, and, clothing himself like Francis, went with him to the Portiuncula to spend his life for the future in trying to help the people to become more like Christ.

A Canon of the cathedral next gave up the post of honour he had long held, and followed Francis. The two disciples went with him to a roadside chapel to dedicate themselves to their new life. They sang hymns and prayed together, and Francis repeated to them the gospel words that had acted so powerfully on himself. 'Brethren,' he added, 'this is our life and our rule, and that of all who may join us. Go, then, and do as you have heard.'

So the three men put up little cabins near the Portiuncula, built of boughs and thatched with straw, and there, in brown, coarse garments, like their leader, Bernardo and Pietro went to live.

Within a few days, a simple-hearted man, named Egidio, a poor labourer in Assisi, was fired with similar enthusiasm, and filled with the longing to turn the world to Christ. But he was afraid to ask to join himself to the company of a man of noble birth and a great Canon of the Church, and going down to the wood which surrounded the Portiuncula, he wandered about hoping to meet Francis alone and tell him his wish. It happened as he had planned, and when Francis had listened to his few stammering words, he answered, 'Brother, most dear, God has shown Himself exceeding gracious to thee,' and taking his hand he led him to the two brethren, Bernardo and Pietro, saying 'God has sent us a good brother.' Does it not tell us something of the character of Francis, that for the next few days he made the humble-minded, untaught man his constant close companion, taking him with him when he went to preach in a neighbouring district? We may picture Francis and Egidio walking along the sunny roads and through the meadows, Francis often singing as he went but stopping when he met a peasant, or when he found a little company of men at work, to say 'the peace of God be with you; love and serve Him, and do worthy penance for

your sins.' At such times, Egidio, eager to help in his own poor way, now that he had put his hand to the plough, would fall behind when Francis had gone on, to say 'Do what my spiritual Father says to you, because what he says is best.'

One by one, other followers joined the little band; men of marked character, and unlike each other in mind, but closely bound together by their love and reverence for Francis, and their desire to imitate the life which Christ had led on earth. The youngest of all these early disciples was a youth named Leo. In his tender playful way, Francis sometimes called him his little sheep, because he followed him so faithfully, and he often chose the youth as his companion when he went up among the hills to meditate and pray, being attracted to him on account of his simple, trusting nature. Part of a little letter has been preserved—one of the very few written by Francis—which Leo always treasured and carried with him when he was sent on a missionary journey which might separate him for some days from his much-loved leader. These are some of the words contained in the letter:—

'Brother Leo,—Your brother Francis greets you and wishes you peace. I speak to you, my son, as a mother to a child, and all the words we have spoken on our journey I sum up and abridge in that word. In whatsoever manner you perceive that you can best please the Lord our God, do it

with the blessing of the Lord and in my obedience. And if it should be necessary for the good of your soul or your consolation that you should come to me, come, my Leo. Farewell in Christ.'

Ginepro was the name of another of the little company that gathered round Francis, in the Portiuncula. There was a quaint humour about this man's words and acts, and the story of some strange prank he had played sometimes came to the knowledge of Francis, who being a quick reader of character, saw behind the joke the devoted, earnest nature of the man, and loved him for his real worth. The meaning of the word 'Ginepro' is Juniper—the name of a tree very common in the Umbrian country—and Francis, when he heard thus of one of Ginepro's pranks, used now and then to say, 'I wish I had a forest of such junipers!'

And now let us think of the kind of life which was followed by Francis and his earliest disciples. They had, as we have seen, no possessions but the coarse dress they wore, which resembled that of the poorest shepherd among the Umbrian hills. Thus, owning nothing themselves, it was supposed they would be better able to touch the hearts of the needy and friendless, and come into close helpful spiritual contact with them. Their plan was not to shut themselves up from the world, and seek their own salvation by hiding away from the temptations of daily life. On the contrary, they would go about

among their fellow-creatures, wherever God's providence seemed to lead them, preaching and nursing, consoling and helping, wherever sin and sorrow were to be found. Francis taught his followers that, as they gave the bread of life to the people among whom they ministered, it was not wrong to ask in return for the daily food needful to keep themselves alive. So, from day to day, they lived on the barest necessaries that kind-hearted people gave them in return for their teaching or their work. Like the birds of the air, in happy trust they took no thought for the morrow.

No work was too hard for these devoted men. They were patient, gentle nurses in the leper hospitals, and ready to minister in any mountain hut where the poor inhabitants were in trouble. In summer, they used to help the peasants with their field work, and these gladly asked them to share their dinner, and gave them a night's rest among the hay or in the barn. Thus they found frequent chances to tell the message which it was their real work in life to give, and they called upon all who would listen to them to forsake their sins and follow the example of Christ.

The Brothers used to enter with hearty sympathy into the life of the country people. In the joyous harvest time, when the laden carts were driven home, they joined in the rejoicings and in leading the procession of the reapers, singing as they went. When Francis was present, his voice

charmed all listeners. We are told that such times were treasured in the memories of those who had taken part in them.

No one could help loving the kind-hearted, joyous Friars who brought help wherever they went. There is one fact to be specially noted concerning them. Francis taught his followers to be joyful. He used to tell them that it is a great help in this world where there is so much sin and sorrow to see glad faces. 'It belongs to the devil and all his crew,' he would say, 'to be of sad countenance, but we ought always be glad and rejoice in the Lord.' For this reason it was his constant aim to keep a rejoicing spirit within himself. It is easy to believe that there were times when the future seemed dark. How could a little handful of men hope to establish a kingdom of God, as they had set themselves to do, in a world which seemed so far removed from the spirit of Christ? In towns, people were less easily moved by their words than were the country people; and as they went by twos and threes on their missionary journeys to parts of Umbria where they were not known, they met at times with scornful treatment, were looked upon as knaves or madmen, and had barely enough food to keep them alive.

It was only natural when they met together at Portiuncula after such experiences that there should be some sad hearts among the poor brethren. Francis, too, was not without times of depression,

but he used to go into the forests or on to the hill tops to talk with God in the silence as a man talks with his friend, and when he returned there was a fresh spring of joy within him and he could cheer the little company anew.

One morning, after a night spent thus in prayer and meditation he came back among his followers saying to them 'Be comforted, my dearest, and rejoice in God, and let us not be sad because we are few, for it has been shown to me by God that you shall increase to a great multitude and shall go on increasing to the end of the world. I saw a multitude of men coming towards us asking that they may receive the habit of our holy religion. The sound of their footsteps still echoes in my ears. I saw them coming from every direction filling all the roads.'

Francis taught his disciples to find their strength in prayer, but no religious meditations were to be excuses for idleness. Everyone who joined his brotherhood must work. The brother who knew no trade must learn one, for it was part of his simple creed that to labour was to pray. Thus Ginefro, for example, made sandals and mended shoes, another could weave rush baskets. Egidio, who had been used to open air life as a labourer was encouraged to work among the olive growers, and in return for his labour he brought many an offering of fruit to add to the scanty store of food in the Portiuncula. Idleness was a great sin in the

eyes of Francis. It is reported that he sent away one of the Brothers who would not work. It is easy to understand why the possession of money seemed so great an evil to him. All the sad memories of his wasted youth were connected with the lavish expenditure of the riches which his father loved so dearly and heaped upon him. How admirable in contrast to those years of idle luxury seemed to him a life spent in prayer and work and in the simple joys which the beauty of nature and loving intercourse with his fellow-creatures provided.

CHAPTER IV.

A PILGRIMAGE TO ROME.

NOW comes the story of a great event. In the summer of the year 1210 this band of poor brethren, including their leader, were twelve in number; and Francis felt that the time had come to ask the blessing of the Pope upon their future, and gain his sanction for the new rules which were to govern their life. It is said that these rules were very simple—probably verses out of the gospels, with additional maxims about diligence in daily work. Francis, as we know, had no thought of forming a new order of monks, or a fresh sect in religion. What he set himself to do—and it was a mighty scheme—was to rouse all men to seek to be followers of Christ, to bring a true Kingdom of God on earth.

One summer morning the twelve brethren set out to begin their pilgrimage to Rome. Francis, who was too much occupied with his own thoughts about their mission to act as their guide, chose Brother Bernardo as leader, and all agreed that

where Bernardo might please to go, they would follow, and where Bernardo might wish to stop to sleep, there they would stop.

Surely never was a more joyful company of pilgrims. On they went barefooted by high road and meadow, by the course of a winding river, and across the sultry Campagna, breaking forth, at times, into songs of gratitude ; sleeping in barns or in deserted churches, living on the scraps given to them by kind-hearted people.

The first meeting of Pope Innocent III. and Francis of Assisi took place thus. The Pope was walking deep in meditation on a terrace of the Lateran, when he suddenly saw standing before him a barefooted, dusty traveller in a shepherd's dress, and with anger he sent the intruder away. But we are told that Innocent had strange dreams that night, and in each of them the figure of that unknown shepherd appeared, but always in the character of one who had great power concerning matters connected with the Church of Rome.

The Pope could not rest satisfied until he had another interview with the stranger whom he had repulsed, and he sent out messengers to search for him. Meanwhile Francis, to his surprise, had met the Bishop of Assisi, who happened just then to be on a visit to Rome, and the Bishop who was always a good friend to Francis, offered to use his influence to gain for him, through one of the Cardinals, an audience with the Pope.

Francis was summoned to the presence of Innocent III. and was permitted to explain the reason of his pilgrimage to Rome. The story was soon told: then he went on to make a strange petition. He did not ask the Pope's approval of the Rule by which he and his disciples had resolved to order their lives—the Rule was founded on Christ's own commands; he asked neither for favours nor privileges, but simply that the Pope would sanction the effort they were going to make to lead their fellow-men to live as they themselves meant to live, in complete and literal obedience to the precepts of the Gospel.

Innocent listened attentively. 'Your life appears to me to be too severe,' he answered. 'I see indeed that your fervour is too great for any doubt of you to be possible, but I ought to consider those who come after you lest your mode of life should be beyond their strength.' Francis was dismissed that the matter might be fully discussed and the Cardinals met together to discuss the strange request.

'Who can live without temporal possessions?' they asked each other. 'It is too hard a life for any man to lead.' Meanwhile Francis praying fervently waited for another summons to the Pope's presence.

Now the power of Innocent III. was great over all Christian lands. From his palace in Rome he interfered with the affairs of Emperors and

Kings and the countries over which they ruled, but above all things the state of the Church throughout Christendom was causing him the deepest anxiety. He knew well that there was wide spread corruption among the Monastic orders in Italy, that the 'religious houses' were peopled with idle and wicked monks ; that great numbers of bishops and priests were unworthy men, who neglected their flocks and by their lives set the worst examples to the people at large. Francis of Assisi, who now appeared before him, was a man who simply sought to follow Christ and to teach the world to do so too, and the Pope was wise enough to see how powerful for good this new spiritual influence was likely to be. Here was a new ideal for the people of the thirteenth century. This teacher sought to preach no special doctrines, to support no heresies, nor did he dispute about creeds—the new ideal he would give to men was simply that of leading good and loving lives.

Once more Francis was summoned to the presence of the Pope. He and his little company of bare-footed pilgrims stood before the Cardinals robed in their sumptuous vestments. Francis had prepared a little parable which might help to explain his meaning and wishes to the Pope, and his words carried such power with them that, in the end, Innocent III. gave his blessing to the twelve brethren, and, appointing Francis as their Superior, bade them go forth in

the name of the Lord to preach repentance. 'Go, my brethren,' said the Pope, 'preach penitence to every one according as the Lord may deign to inspire you. Then when the All-powerful shall have made you multiply and go forward you will refer to us. We will now concede what you ask; we may then with greater security accord to you even more than you ask.'

Little did Francis and his simple followers dream then of the troubles which lay before them from the interference, in course of time, of the great power of the Church of Rome. We shall hear of this as our story advances.

Those days in the city of Rome had been wearisome to the 'little brothers' as they called themselves, and gladly did they set forth to return to their beloved Umbria. So anxious were they to depart, that they crossed the parched Campagna in the great heat of the day without sufficient food. Faint and exhausted, they took shelter in an ancient tomb near the town of Orta, whence some of them, after resting, brought back eatables given to them in charity.

Francis, thoroughly wearied by all his experiences in Rome, perhaps more so than by the toils of the journey, went apart from his companions to seek refreshment in solitude. A great longing came over him to spend life in that solitary place as a hermit. Might he not do better, he asked himself, to live a life of prayer alone with God

rather than go into the sinful, careless world and preach to people who very likely would not listen to him? It was a strong temptation; but as he mused he looked up towards the hills on one of which his native town of Assisi lay, and as he thought of the people who needed so much to be helped and taught he was filled with a great pity. The selfish impulse fled before the recollection that he could not lead a helpful, loving life such as Christ had led, if he were to hide himself away from his fellow-creatures; and stronger and brighter than ever rose before him the ideal of the life that he must follow.

Picture the twelve homeless men journeying on again. They reach the plain below Assisi, and at a spot about an hour's walk from the city they leave the highway for the fields. A strange-looking village comes in sight in a lonely place which travellers are seldom likely to visit. It is a leper settlement to be shunned by all prudent men. Near it stands a half-ruined cottage, by the side of which the bed of a stream, dry in summer time but in winter filled by a roaring torrent, leads up the hillside which flanks Mount Subasio.

In this place, known as Rivo Torto, the brethren took up their abode. It was to be their meeting-place; and, when they were not away on missionary journeys, the leper village was to be a field of work. The cottage was a thatched hovel;

its earthern floor gave little space for the sleepers to rest their wearied limbs at night ; but, scrambling up the dry bed of the torrent, which gave more fitting foothold for mountain goats than for men, they could gain access far up in the wood on the mountain side to some natural grottoes. It was to one of these caverns that Francis used to climb when he felt the need of solitude, and he would spend the night in this narrow cell which he had to stoop to enter. The doorway is overgrown now by thick curtains of ivy, but when Francis used to go up to seek fresh strength and help from God in the silence, the fresh air had free access, and he could watch the dawn breaking over the hills.

At the entrance of the grotto bloomed cyclamen, orchids, and violets, and the woods were filled with the songs of happy birds as the sun rose. Then Francis used to join his voice with theirs in thanksgiving. A story is told, of which Brother Leo was perhaps the first narrator, that one night a nightingale was singing outside the cell, and the man and the bird sang praises till the human voice was wearied out.

Before long we shall hear how the tender heart of Francis cared for all the dumb creatures round him, how he made friends of them, and how, to the amazement of rough men, whose nature was so different from his own, he was able to tame even savage wolves, and to bring the timid turtle doves and swallows circling round him perching on his

shoulders, or resting on the ground at his feet. People were apt in those days to interpret as a miracle any event which was not within their every day experience; but this power over animals which Francis exercised sprang, like his influence over men, from his overflowing love and the strength of his will, which was fed by constant waiting upon God.

The story of the journey of Francis and his companions to Rome and of their interview with the Pope became known in Assisi. It was an event which naturally became the subject of general conversation. In a Roman Catholic country the news that the Pope had given the pilgrims his blessing and his sanction to their mission had great effect upon the minds of all who heard it, and the report spread quickly. It seemed as if the vision of Francis might prove a true prophecy, and as if the great multitude of men was indeed beginning to draw near. When Francis entered any of the Umbrian towns to preach, the people thronged together to hear his simple words. They hastened from all parts to the market place, or the hillside, wherever he took his stand. A rumour that brown-cloaked, bare-footed friars were to be seen approaching a town led to great excitement. Sometimes the town bells were rung; sometimes the glad people came out to meet them, waving olive branches as a sign of welcome. It must have been a wonderful sight to look upon the crowds when

Francis was speaking. Even strong men in their excitement shed tears. Yet the speaker was small n stature and his dress was worn and soiled, his feet were bare, and there was no great eloquence in his words; but the spiritual strength within him gave force and reality to all he said.

At length it came to pass that Francis was invited again and again to preach in the cathedral of Assisi. There were no seats in the great building; the people, standing or kneeling, faced the platform on which the preacher stood, and it was the custom for them to give vent to their feelings by applause. To listen to a preacher in the market-place or on the open field was a novelty in Assisi. To hear a sermon in the cathedral, on the contrary, was an ordinary experience; but such sermons as Francis preached there were hitherto unknown. He touched on no dogmas hard to understand; all he said was practical and very simple. He called on the people to forsake their sins, to love and help one another; to follow the example and obey the teaching of Christ. He warned them against the love of riches and the lives of selfish luxury which the wealthy Italians so often led, and besought them to live in peace. Straight from his heart came the words the spirit moved him to utter, and they came with power to the listeners because he carried out his teaching in his own daily life. Example is always more powerful than precept.

Francis became a peacemaker among the quar-

relsome people of Assisi. There were jealousies and dissensions between the poorer citizens and the wealthy and noble class; struggles for greater liberty on the part of the former, which the latter were equally resolved to crush. On one occasion Francis was called upon to mediate between the two parties, and it was through his intercession that an agreement was signed by which tranquility was restored.

Thus it was not only on the poorer classes of Umbria that the wonderful influence acted. This 'poor little one of God,' as in his humility he often called himself, went about among all sorts and conditions of men. Wherever the way opened, there went his willing feet, and he served the inhabitants of castles and palaces as willingly as those in the poorest huts in the land.

We must not think that Francis had no temptations to conquer in this life which he had chosen. He had to put a stern guard over himself lest at any time he should give way ever so little. We know how sometimes he longed for peace and solitude instead of active service among men. It was his nature to love beautiful things, as, for example, in former days, the music of the Trorubadous and the rich velvet and cloth in which he dressed. Even daintily cooked food was a satisfaction and a pleasure to him. Sometimes it came in the way of his duty to dine at the tables of rich men. Then it was genuine principle which led him to sprinkle

ashes which he carried with him on his food, saying with a smile, 'Brother ash is very pure.' He had many a hard struggle with himself in carrying out the kind of life he thought it was right for him to lead; and it was this battling against temptation that made him so strong, and brave, and pure.

We can see now that it would be a mistake for us to obey *literally* the precepts of Christ spoken in a very different age; it would be a mistake to *imitate* exactly his words and deeds; we must try to carry his *spirit* into our own lives. But see how wonderful the influence of Francis of Assisi was because he was consecrated to a noble aim, because he obeyed with a whole heart what *he* felt to be the law of life for him. Half-hearted men have never moved the world. It is earnestness and enthusiasm for what we believe to be right that is needed. Because men saw that Francis followed Christ with all his heart, they began to speak of him as *Saint* Francis of Assisi.

You have heard how the poorer people of the Umbrian towns flocked into the market-places and squares to listen to St. Francis, and how the enthusiasm spread among the wealthy and noble. The following story of an experience which befel him in one of his short missionary journeys will serve as an example. In those warlike times, not only were the cities surrounded with walls and their inhabitants prepared for sudden attacks from neighbouring enemies, but the castles of the nobles also

were strongly guarded and ready against assault. Here and there on the hills stood these solitary buildings, the homes of the great lords and ladies, with their retainers ; and Francis had a message to bear to them. One day, he and a Brother who was his travelling companion, climbed a hill-side that they might visit one of those castles which frowned down upon them from its rocky height. The men-at-arms, watching on the battlements, saw from afar the well-known brown cloaks of the Friars ; and by the time the travellers applied for admission, interest in their visit was aroused through the castle.

Perhaps it sounds like an idle tale which could have no foundation in truth, yet we are told on good authority, as a fact, that when Francis made an appeal to the assembled dwellers in the castle to repent and amend their lives an astonishing event happened. One and all of his excited listeners were ready straightway to follow him wherever he went and to adopt the sort of life he had made his own. If flowing tears and eager petitions showed the sincerity of their enthusiasm, never were people more in earnest for the time. Probably Saint Francis was used to the impulsive, versatile nature of his countrymen, and knew that such sudden conversions were rarely lasting ; but in any case, how could he lead such a company of men and women out into the world—he who lived, as he loved to say, like the larks, trusting to God's providence each day for food ?

Experiences such as this led him to see that it was impossible for the bulk of men and women to leave their homes and occupations to join his band of Brethren who were wanderers on the face of the earth. And so, really, the best part of his teaching and influence began when he taught people that they must try to follow Christ's example in their daily lives at home, to live in the world as not of the world, helpers of all who needed help; the rich and powerful remembering that they were stewards of God's gifts, and must give an account to Him of all the treasures they possessed.

It was by promising to form such a Rule or Order as this that he contented the disappointed people who wished at once to take up a life like his own. It was afterwards known as the third Rule or Order. The first Order was that, which he first founded, of the men who left all to follow him. Of the foundation of the second Order we shall hear in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V.

THE PORTIUNCULA.

ONE evening, a peasant driving his ass before him, left the highway to Assisi and turning into the meadows, rambled on till he reached the cottage at Rivo Torto, which had been for a time the shelter of Francis and his companions.

The man was a boor, with no reverence in his nature. His aim was to drive out the band of Brethren, and make a refuge for himself in the tumble-down dwelling that no one owned. 'Go in! Go in!' he shouted, as he struck his poor animal with his stick; 'we shall be most comfortable here,' and straightway he prepared to establish himself and his ass for the night. Saint Francis, who was always courteous, shrank from contact with rude, violent people; moreover, he never struggled to gain any benefit for himself. Consequently, the interloper gained his way, and the Brethren resolved to find another shelter. It would have been needful, in any case, to have done this very shortly; for they were increasing so rapidly in

numbers that they had outgrown the tiny dwelling. But this sudden incursion hurried them away.

What was to be done for the homeless band? It was needful to provide a permanent shelter, where the Brothers could meet together at stated times, and, if possible, also they must have a little chapel where mass could be said.

Francis went to his friend, the Bishop of Assisi; but he could give no help in the matter. Then he climbed the steep slope of Mount Subasio, to the Benedictine monastery, and laid his case before the Abbot. It happened that the little chapel of Portiuncula, which Francis had rebuilt with his own hands, belonged to the Benedictine Order. Great was the joy of Francis, when the Abbot granted to him the use of this chapel, and the ground about it, saying: 'Behold, brother, we grant that thou desirest. But should the Lord multiply thy Brotherhood, we will that this place be the mother-house of thy Order.'

We can fancy how diligently the Brothers worked to build the little mud huts which soon surrounded the old church, with its pent roof and great doorway. A hedge and trees enclosed the settlement, and through a side gate easy access could be gained to the woods which which were so needful to the Brethren, and especially to Francis, as quiet retreats for meditation and prayer.

Not every one who sought admission to the Brotherhood was at once received. Each week,

fresh members presented themselves. They were chiefly young men from Assisi and the neighbourhood, both nobles and peasants; and from every one Francis asked for some proof of sincerity. The applicant must forgive an enemy, if he had one; must make restitution, if he had wronged any one; and prove, by giving away his possessions, that he was really desirous to lead the self-denying life of poverty required of him.

Let us pause here for a moment, in the course of our story, to think what a wonderful influence went out into Italy from these poor mud huts round the Portiuncula. Think of the worthless, worldly lives in which numbers of people were living, amid all the widespread corruptions of wealth and power; even the monks and priests, who should have been teachers and examples, sunk too often in ignorance and self-indulgence; and, then, think of Saint Francis, simply trying to obey the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount, and to live like Christ among his fellow-men. With no possessions to call his own, he was full of joyous trust in God, constantly thrilled with the beauty of Nature, and in word and deed showing his tender love and pity, not only for every human being, but for the humblest, smallest creature, even to the very worm that he would lift out of the pathway. And think of the enthusiasm which made his life so real, and which wakened such numbers of people about him to religious earnestness, and to the longing to lead

worthier lives. We are reading a wonderful story out of those old days. Yet it may serve to remind us of the faithful, joyous, helpful spirit by which, if we will, we can each in his own way serve the present world.

Our story takes us now from the settlement at Portiuncula to a palace in Assisi, belonging to Count Favorino Sciffi, the descendant of an ancient Roman family. It is a strange romance out of the thirteenth century upon which we now enter, and it is specially needful, as we read it, to try to realise for the time the ways of life and thought of the people of Assisi six hundred years ago.

The Counts of Sciffi were lords of a castle on Mount Subasio, of which the ruins are still pointed out to travellers. Concerning this inheritance, Count Favorino was occasionally at war with a rival claimant, with whom he engaged in fierce skirmishes. Like many another noble in Umbria, the Count was often in arms on some pretext; and, at such times, his Countess would go on pilgrimage to the South of Italy, or even to the Holy Land. When at home, they did not live in their mountain fortress, but in a palace which stood within the city walls, and it was their habit to take part in all the festivities of the wealthy Assisians. Their elder daughter, Clara, a girl of seventeen years of age, was betrothed, against her will, to one of the young spendthrift nobles of their acquaintance—a man for whom she had neither affection nor

esteem ; but as forced, loveless marriages were not uncommon in those days, the parents refused to listen to the pleadings of their unhappy child.

Ever since she could remember anything that had taken place in her experience, Clara had longed to lead a worthier life than the one she was compelled to follow. She had gained a character for saintliness from her companions, and seemed to them to live in a different atmosphere. Like a captive bird, she pined amid her uncongenial surroundings, and tried to find peace of mind in saying her rosary and the few prayers she could repeat.

Suddenly, a new influence touched her. Saint Francis preached in the cathedral, and Clara went, as did the rest of her family and her acquaintance, to listen. The young girl was carried away with appeals which were so new to her ; but how could she hope to obey them in her guarded, trammelled life ? In some way, she must escape from the idle luxury in which her days were spent, and from the dreaded marriage into which she was soon to be forced. Perhaps, thought Clara, if I could ask the Saint's advice, he would tell me what to do. The more she pondered over the matter, the clearer it seemed to her that she could find no safer guide than the preacher whose mission the great Pope himself had blessed.

So thought also Clara's aunt, her father's sister, who was at all times her trusted adviser. Under her aunt's care, the young heiress was at any time

allowed to go beyond the bounds of the palace, and so it came to pass that the two ladies were able without observation to seek an interview with Saint Francis, and ask his advice. Who can wonder at the counsel he gave? At that time, a convent life was thought to be the holiest vocation for a woman, and when Saint Francis was convinced that the unhappy, persecuted girl truly longed to gain the safe shelter of the church, he promised her that she should take the vow of perpetual poverty at the Portiuncula chapel, and be received immediately afterwards into the neighbouring Benedictine nunnery.

In the old palace the narrow doorway is shown from which Clara went out on the night of Palm Sunday to join her waiting Aunt and one or two faithful maids in whose care she was to make the short journey through the silent town and across the meadows to Portiuncula. It was nearly midnight when the fugitives reached the wood and heard the chanting of the Brethren who awaited them in the chapel; but as they groped their way through the trees along the uneven paths the singing ceased, and through the branches they saw the light of flickering torches coming towards them, and they were led silently and quickly by some of the friars to the midnight mass which Francis served.

A strange spectacle followed, such as had never been witnessed in that little church before. A

company of weeping women and brown-cloaked, bare-footed monks, and in the centre Saint Francis clothing with a black veil the young girl whose long, golden hair and discarded jewels lay upon the altar. The vows were taken, and the new life begun. As the dawn broke, Francis, taking her by the hand, led Clara in the long brown cloak of his order across the fields, and left her with the nuns.

Needless to say there was a great commotion in the Sciffi Palace when the flight of the heiress was discovered next morning. The Count by means of threats soon learned the place of her retreat, and marched in passionate haste, with a band of followers, to the convent doors. It was no loving father distracted with grief for the loss of his daughter who disturbed the peace of the nunnery, but the proud Count who was enraged at the defeat of his wicked scheme. To carry Clara off by violence was his intention; but when he had forced his way into her presence, he shrank back, awed by the calmness and courage shown in her face and words, as she lifted her veil to let him see her short cut hair, one sign of the solemn vow she had taken.

The Benedictine convent served only as a temporary home for Clara. The life which the nuns led there was not such as Saint Francis had planned for her. And now, passing over a short interval, our story takes us once more to the old grey

stone chapel of St. Damian hidden in the wood of olive trees, whose ruined walls Francis had rebuilt with his own hands a few years before. This was to be the dwelling wherein Clara and those who followed her example were to lead lives of prayer and work. For, once more, the Abbot of the monastery on Mount Subasio had proved a good friend to Francis, and had provided him with this shelter for his new Order of 'Poor Clares.'

Clara's younger sister joined her in the convent, and in a short time other Umbrian ladies took the vow of perpetual poverty. Afterwards, on the death of her father, her mother and aunt also received the habit from the hands of St. Francis. Later still other settlements of 'Poor Clares' were founded in different parts of Italy, but we will think now of the first days of the new Order, and picture the life of Clara and her companions in the quiet old building in the plain below Assisi.

Clara was the first Abbess of the new Order. No written rules which the nuns must obey were given to her by St. Francis. She, and her companions following her example, entered at once into the spirit of the religious life which he would have them lead—a life which was full of love to God and men. They never went beyond the boundaries of the wood which surrounded the chapel; a missionary life was in those days out of the question for women; their lives must be led within the narrow limits of their convent walls, but

their days were filled with work and hallowed by prayer. The Brothers at Portiuncula provided them with the simple daily food they needed. In return, they used to spin stuff to make the habits of the friars and linen for the altars of the poor churches in Umbria. In a hut which Francis helped to build close to the chapel for use as a hospital, they nursed the sick whom he sent to them, and they were always ready to welcome the sad souls who often came to them for comfort and advice. Their influence was not confined to their own borders. It went out among the people of Assisi, and, by degrees, far beyond the town, among the luxury-loving, idle ladies of Umbria and other districts in Italy. To hear of the pure-souled, gentle young Abbess and her companions, who spent their days in constantly helping and loving, led many other women to long for higher aims than those which governed the ordinary households of Italy, and brought about a change for the better in their unhappy lives.

Deeply did Clara reverence 'the Saint,' so many years older than herself, who had rescued her out of her hopeless existence. It was a joy to her, used as she had been to tales of war and bloodshed, to think of this deeply religious man who found his happiness in helping every living creature that came in his way. She, too, loved the sunshine and the flowers, and the simple life in which greed, and grab, and oppression had no part.

She made herself a little garden on a sort of terrace by the chapel, and there in the evenings she went to water her plants; and as she looked across the plain to the spot where the rays of the setting sun fell on the huts at Portiuncula, she used to send her thanks and blessing to her friend. 'God uses us to help each other,' and in her turn the young Abbess became the consoler and adviser whom St. Francis sadly needed when, by the interference of unkind meddlers, his plans were frustrated and his work failed. There were times then when he doubted whether he had chosen the right path in life, whether he had not been mistaken in the ideal he had tried to follow. It was Clara who could give him hope and comfort, who, with her heart full of reverence and sympathy, knew how to speak words that sent him back with fresh spirit to his work.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ORDER OF THE TERTIARIES.

TWICE every year all the Brothers who had been scattered on various missions came back to the deserted huts at Portiuncula to meet their leader, St. Francis, and gain new courage from his presence and counsels. As time passed and these meetings became more influential, and the Brothers multiplied, the assemblies were known by the name of 'Chapters General,' and the most important took place at Whitsuntide. As the day of meeting approached the brown cloaked Friars might be seen in little companies of twos and threes, coming down the hillsides or along the valleys towards Portiuncula. They were all eager to tell St. Francis what had happened to them since they last met, of the joys their mission work had brought to them, and the disappointments they had experienced. Often they had to tell of ill-treatment; but Francis taught them to think kindly and hopefully even of those who had wronged them, saying 'There are men who to-day appear

to us to be members of the devil who shall yet one day be members of Christ.'

The people of Assisi, and the villages among the hills, gladly gave food to the Brothers who came among them with goodwill and kind words; and during the time the Chapter lasted, the assembly was fed by the offerings with which the wallets were filled at cottage doors.

These meetings were seasons of great refreshment to the wearied Brothers. The time was occupied by prayers, and meditations, and hymn-singing, led by the beautiful voice they all loved so much, and a council meeting was held to consider the better observance of their rule and settle the forthcoming journeys of the missionaries. When they were about to set out again on different ways, Francis gave them all his blessing, and had always some parting advice for them. His farewell words on one occasion have been preserved. 'Our life in the midst of the world,' he said, 'ought to be such that on hearing us, or seeing us, every one shall feel constrained to praise our Heavenly Father. You proclaim peace and love, have it in your hearts. Be not an occasion of wrath or scandal to any one, but by your gentleness may all be led to peace, concord, and good works.'

In the year 1212 Francis, who saw his Order spreading on every side in Italy, was filled with a new longing. It was his strong desire to go further

afield to the East—to the country where the Crusaders, bearing the sign of the cross and in the name of Christ, were waging a long warfare with the Sultan and his people. There Francis would carry his message of peace and goodwill, and he was persuaded that the fierce Saracens would welcome the Christian religion, if the teachings of Christ, which had taken such hold on his own life and thoughts, were explained to them with simplicity and clearness.

So he set sail for Syria, full of enthusiasm for the work which lay before him. But a great storm arose in the Adriatic Sea when his voyage was only just begun, and the ship was cast ashore on the coast of Illyria. He learned that no vessel would sail thence for the East that year. The only course open to him seemed to be to give up the mission to Syria and sail back again to Italy, that he might reach Assisi in time for the next 'Chapter General' which it was important he should not miss.

It was no easy matter to gain a passage back across the Adriatic, but we are told that he and his companion, probably Brother Leo, found themselves at length once more at Ancona, on the Italian coast. On his way to Assisi, Francis preached in the towns of Central Italy. The people crowded to hear him, and great numbers were touched profoundly by his words and enrolled themselves in the Order, so that year it made

greater progress than ever; and learned men, nobles, citizens, and peasants were carried away on the wonderful wave of religious enthusiasm, and professed themselves eager to lead the new life to which Francis called them.

It was in the course of this journey that Francis arrived at a castle near San Marino, in Central Italy, when a grand fête was being held. Nobles from far and near were assembled to take part in the feasting and tournament; and as the Brothers entered the Court, in the brown habits of their Order, dusty with travelling, the gaiety was at its height.

Some who were there recognized the famous preacher of Assisi, who had come thus unexpectedly among them, and the news of his arrival spread fast. When he began to speak he at once found attentive listeners. The music and singing ceased; the merrymakers forgot all the attractions about them. Even the tones of his voice seemed to have power to waken into life the hidden germs of good that were slumbering within many a self-indulgent worldling. There was one powerful Count present on this occasion, known as Orlando of Chiusi, who in his gratitude and enthusiasm offered a strange gift to the bare-footed teacher who owned no worldly possessions. He drew St. Francis on one side, and told him that, among his estates in Tuscany, he was owner of a lonely mountain called the Verna where, out of reach of

the noises of the world, those who loved silence and contemplation might at any time find a peaceful retreat. 'This mountain will I willingly give to you and your brethren if it pleases you,' he said, 'and may the gift help towards the salvation of my soul.' We may think this was a strange motive for his offering, and out of all harmony with the unselfish spirit of the teachings of St. Francis; but we must not forget the influence of the Roman Catholic doctrines under which the Count had passed his life.

The thought of this quiet mountain retreat was a great joy to Francis, and he accepted for himself and his brethren the Count's gift. But he had no time to spend in a visit to Verna at present. We must picture him again as soon as the Chapter at Assisi had been held setting out on another distant missionary journey. This time his destination was Spain.

Little is known about this expedition beyond the fact that he undertook it with the greatest zeal, travelling chiefly on foot; here and there falling ill of fever, and pressing on again before his strength was restored, outstripping his companion (a much stronger man than himself) in his eagerness to sow his spiritual seed in new ground.

From various causes—probably his ignorance of the language was one—he came back deeply discouraged, confessing that his mission to Spain had proved a failure. With sad heart he crossed

the meadows from Portiuncula to the Chapel of St. Damian to tell his trouble to the Abbess Clara, and he found fresh help and encouragement as he talked to her. There were fields nearer home ripe for the harvest, she told him, and God needed labourers there. All his depression passed away, and full of his old trust and joy he set forth to preach in the villages of Umbria.

It has already been said that Francis dearly loved all the living creatures about him. The birds, the sheep in the fields, even timid animals in the woods all trusted him and ran to him when they wanted protection. He used to speak of them all as his little brothers and sisters, and many beautiful stories are preserved of his tenderness for the dumb creatures. These loving memories were treasured after his death by the people who had known him; and fathers and mothers repeated them to their little children. In course of time such recollections were collected together and written down; and in the form of a small book of bad paper and poor type called 'The Little Flowers of St. Francis,' they were circulated widely among the Italian peasants. The anecdotes may very probably not be authentic in many cases, but they are true to his spirit, and they help us to picture the loving, tender influence he shed around him.

Here is the record of an event which is said to have happened after his visit to the Abbess Clara when he was going on his way from St. Damian to

preach to the people of Bevagna, a village in Umbria. As he drew near to his destination he saw a great flock of fluttering birds in a neighbouring field. Leaving his companions, he crossed from the road into the meadow, saying, 'I want to preach to my little brothers the birds.'

'My little brothers,' he said gently as he approached them, 'you ought to praise and greatly love the Lord who created you. He has given you all that is necessary for you—feathers for clothing and wings to fly with. He lets you live in the pure air. You neither sow nor reap, and yet He takes care of you and watches over you and guides you.'

The birds made no attempt to fly away but arched their necks and spread their wings, and opened their beaks as if to welcome him, while he went up and down among them, even stroking them with the border of his tunic.

Often afterwards did St. Francis tell the story of the Birds of Bevagna. It was one of the happy memories of the day which was consecrated to grateful thoughts of Clara, who had restored his faith and courage.

Another day, on the same journey, he reached a little town lying among the hills. See him standing on high ground and the people gathered before him on an open space. Quaint houses with their tiled and coloured roofs, and an old cathedral adorned with pinnacles were close at hand—the blue sky over all. After he began to speak, it is

said, multitudes of swallows, some of which were nest building in the eaves of the old buildings, came circling round him, and his words were lost in their happy chirpings.

'It is my turn to speak, little sister swallows,' said this lover of the birds 'hearken now to the word of God. Keep silent and very quiet till I have finished'; and the story tells that a hush fell upon the birds to the great astonishment of the people. A marvellous story to us too, which we may put on one side as fable if we choose, but like many other similar stories it records truly the impression left on the minds of his contemporaries of one side of the character of Francis of Assisi.

Another anecdote tells how a leveret caught in a trap was brought, on one occasion, by one of the Brothers to Francis. 'Little brother leveret, come to me,' said the gentle voice, and the little creature escaping from the hands that held it fled to Francis and hid itself in the folds of his tunic. He stroked it and put it on the ground that it might run to its home in the adjoining wood, but it only nestled up to him again and had to be carried away before it would seek its freedom.

In a wild district of Umbria, the people of a place called Gubbo were, it is said, tormented by the incursions of a fierce wolf that they tried in vain to catch and kill. Saint Francis came into the neighbourhood and an appeal for help

was made to him. He tamed the savage beast and 'brother Wolf' put his paw into the gentle hand of the man who loved and trusted every living thing.

The missionary journey which followed the visit to Clara and the sermon to the birds of Bevagna was a constant triumph. Processions of rejoicing people came out to meet and welcome Francis as he drew near to the various towns and villages. Men and women poured out to him the story of their troubles, and brought their sick to be healed by him. Tales of the miracles which he wrought grew up among the country people, who were always prone to legendary lore, and the wondrous nature of the stories increased as they were repeated. Doubtless this was the case, but there is no doubt, also, that Francis had power to heal the nervous maladies of the people. For example, a man was brought to him one day suffering from epilepsy. His tortures were terrible to witness as he dashed himself upon the ground, bounded high into the air, or lay outstretched and rigid, foaming at the mouth. As the tender, pitiful look of Francis fell on the sufferer and the unhappy man heard the encouraging words of the far-famed preacher, who, it was well-known, was always ready to help, his struggles ceased and new health came back to the poor racked body. This so-called miracle (and others resembling it) was really an act of love wrought by one whose soul by prayer

and meditation was fed with daily strength from God, and who went about with hands outstretched to help and words of pity on his lips.

To form a third Branch of his Order became, in course of time, a necessity of which Francis had never dreamed in the early days of his mission. This third Branch must be wide enough in its Rules to receive as members men and women who, by reason of their home ties and daily occupations, could not be enrolled in either of the Branches already established. When whole communities thrilled by his preaching and his personal influence responded to his appeal and besought his help to lead the new life to which he called them, the result could not fail to be a fresh development in his plans.

For himself, and his first followers, it had been needful to be free from all home and social ties. Only thus, he believed, could they hope to imitate Christ's life and thereby bring back his forgotten teachings and example to the minds of men, who must be taught that the beauty and joy of life consisted not in idle luxury and in heaping up possessions, that work was a sacred duty and to help one's fellows the root of all real happiness. It was merely a widening of his aim when he established his Order of 'Tertiaries' or 'Brothers and Sisters of Penitence.' Henceforth, parents living in the world need not forsake households and children to join the 'Lesser Brothers' or 'Poor Clares' if they would 'follow Christ.'

In a letter written to 'All Christians' Francis explained the nature of this Order of 'Tertiaries.' Certain fasts and occasional penances were enjoined, but, broadly speaking, it was required that those who entered the Order should open their hearts to pity and to help the sorrow and sickness around them; they must find a holy calling in the smallest duty, they must reduce their wants and live simple lives, and give of their possessions to those who needed their help. 'Brothers and Sisters of Penitence' must live in love with their fellow-men; they must remember Christ's words 'Blessed are the Peacemakers,' and not only refuse, to carry arms but also avoid disputes and bitter words.

No date can be given for the foundation of this third branch. It grew up when Francis found the need for it, and it is easy to see that it must have been the agency through which his influence was most widely carried out into the world. Here it is worth while to quote a passage from Sabatier's famous life of St. Francis:—

'This success which bathed the soul of Francis with joy did not arouse in him the smallest movement of pride. Never has man had a greater power over hearts because never preacher preached himself less. One day Brother Masseo desired to put his modesty to the test.

'"Why thee? why thee? why thee?" he repeated again and again, as if to make a mock of Francis.

'"What are you saying?" cried Francis at last.

'"I am saying that everybody follows thee, every one desires to see thee, hear thee, and obey thee, and yet for all that thou art neither beautiful, nor learned, nor of noble family. Whence comes it, then, that it should be thee whom the world desires to follow."

'On hearing these words the blessed Francis, full of joy, raised his eyes to heaven, and after remaining a long time absorbed in contemplation he knelt praising and blessing God with extraordinary fervour. Then, turning towards Masseo: "Thou wishest to know why it is I whom all men follow? It is because the eyes of the Most High have willed it thus. He continually watches the good and the wicked, and as His most holy eyes has not found among sinners any smaller man, nor any more insufficient and more sinful, therefore He has chosen me to accomplish the marvellous work which God has undertaken. He chose me because He could find no one more worthless, and he wished here to confound the nobility and grandeur, the strength, the beauty, and learning of this world."'

Sabatier adds:—

'This reply throws a ray of light upon St. Francis's heart. The message which he brought to the world is once again the glad tidings announced to the poor. . . . . He comes to remind the world that the welfare of man, the peace of his heart, the joy of his life, are neither in money nor in learning, nor in strength, but in an upright and sincere will. Peace to men of good will.'[1]

[1] Life of St. Francis of Assisi, p. 184.

CHAPTER VII.

CARDINAL UGOLINI.

WHEN Francis of Assisi and his little band of eleven followers went on their pilgrimage to Rome in the year 1210 to ask for the blessing of Pope Innocent III. on their Rule and their future mission work, Cardinal Ugolini, the Pope's nephew, who afterwards became Pope Gregory IX., is said to have been present at the reception. However this may have been, in a few years' time Ugolini was sent as Legate from the Papal Court to Tuscany, and, as representative of the Pope, ruled over the affairs of the Roman Catholic Church throughout a large part of central Italy.

Now it was in this part of Italy that Francis was carrying on the wonderful mission described in the last chapter; and Ugolini, from his palace in the city of Florence, watched with the deepest interest the progress of his influence upon the people. When at length in the course of his missionary work Francis came to Florence, Ugolini

sent for him and received him with great kindness, offering to act as his patron and give him his protection and support if ever he needed such help.

In course of time, the powerful Cardinal and bare-footed Friar became intimate friends. More than once Ugolini met Francis at Portiuncula to spend some quiet hours with him in prayer and meditation ; and, on such occasions, that he might enter as much as possible into the retired, peaceful life so unlike his own, he threw off, for the time, his rich robes, and clothed himself in the poor habit of a Franciscan Brother.

Ugolini really loved Francis, and appreciated to some extent the beauty of his character. But another motive beside that of friendship led him to cultivate this intercourse. The fact was that Ugolini perceived that this quickly-increasing Franciscan Order, of which Francis was the life and soul, might be made of the greatest service in strengthening the power of the Church of Rome. But he saw, also, that to this end the Rule of poverty and simplicity of life which Francis laid upon his followers was unsuitable, and his aim was to induce Francis, who had been carrying out his ideals with such perfect freedom, to place himself and his plans under the control of the powers at Rome, by whom the changes which seemed needful, if the Roman Catholic Church was to profit by the Franciscan Order, would be made.

This was the state of affairs when in probably 1218[1] the festival of Whit-Sunday came round and the Chapter-General was to be held again at Portiuncula. As the Order had increased so fast of late it was expected that greater numbers than usual would attend the assembly; but no one dreamed of the wonderful spectacle that was to herald Whit-Sunday.

To give shelter to the Brothers, who would gather as usual from all quarters of Italy, Francis and the little company already at Portiuncula had built up huts in long rows on the plain before the Chapel consisting of posts supporting roofs of woven rushes or mats. For this reason this famous Chapter is known in history as the 'Chapter of the Mats,' though the name might also be applied to many of the smaller gatherings. The plain was thus the guest chamber, and Francis awaited the coming of the guests.

Over the hills and across the plain the first little companies of Friars began to come in sight, their silence only broken as they greeted each other with the words, 'The peace of God be with you!' This was only the beginning. By and by they were to be seen advancing on every side. They came by hundreds, swarms of bare-footed, brown-robed Brothers, till at last five thousand were assembled.

[1] Authorities differ as to the exact date (within a year earlier or later) of this Chapter-General.

Francis went among them from band to band, saluting them in his friendly, joyous way, exhorting them when they went out into the world again to love the poor, behave to the priests with reverence, and to pray and work. To such a multitude no address, audible to all, could possibly be given. As he passed along the ranks he prayed them to give no thought to what they were to eat and drink, but to praise God and pray for spiritual food from Him.

Truly it was a marvellous gathering. There was no store of provisions for these birds of the air, who trusted God to feed them because they worked for Him. In some way the report spread of the strange sight that was to be seen on the Umbrian plain, and troupes of nobles and men of position from castles and cities came riding in haste down the hill-sides with their retainers after them. There, too, came Cardinal Ugolini in his scarlet robes, a great retinue about him, and crosses lifted up on high glittering in the sunshine.

But see what else comes in sight! From Assisi, and Perugia, and Spoleto, and other cities on the hill-tops, and from villages round about, come carts, and horses, and asses laden with food sufficient to feed this great multitude. What greater proof of the gratitude and love of the people for their 'Saint Francis' who had lived and worked among them, could be found than this voluntary act of service? As the men who brought the

supplies unloaded, knights and barons sprang from their horses that they might hand about the provisions. The spirit of helpfulness, which it was the mission of Francis to impart to men, was, for the time, filling all hearts.

Ugolini, watching the assembly closely, saw as the day went on how the vast assembly of Friars 'was so occupied in talking of God, in prayer, in exercises of charity and all with so much gravity and modesty that no noise was heard and no one was disturbed.' Though some important business was transacted it yet seemed like a great meeting for worship, so peaceful was the scene. In his astonishment the Cardinal exclaimed—'Truly this is the camp and army of the Knights of God.

Another astonished spectator was present at this great gathering whose name was destined to be even better known in the world than that of Cardinal Ugolini, the future Pope of Rome. This was Dominic Guzman, a Spanish priest, who, like Francis of Assisi, was filled with apostolic zeal to mend the world by his preaching. Dominic, also, was gathering round him numbers of followers. They were known as Dominican Friars (or Brothers) for they, like the Poor Brothers in the great Franciscan Order, sought their field of work in the world and did not, like monks, shut themselves up within narrow Monastery walls.

But Dominic and Francis, both leaders of men, and famous teachers, were nevertheless most

unlike. Francis was called 'the father of the poor,' Dominic 'the Hammer of the heretics.' The one preached the need to lead a loving Christ-like life. The other wanted to rid the world of heresies and false doctrines, and by his preaching to lead all men to hold the same creed. To Francis, character and conduct were the most important matters in life, not special points of doctrine. Then, too, there was another difference between the two men. Dominic was ready to obey orders. He sought for instructions in his work from Rome and was as eager as Ugolini to extend the power of the Roman Catholic Church. Francis, as we know, had his own ideals and sought his inspirations straight from God. He wanted no interference from men as he carried out his Rule and tried to lead people to imitate Christ's loving life and obey his teachings.

Dominic was amazed to see the great multitnde of Poor Brothers so free from care about the things of this life, so contented in the midst of poverty; the sympathy of the populace and their ready help astonished him: above all he was impressed by proofs on every hand of the great influence of St. Francis. This influence acted powerfully on Dominic himself, so much so that he would very gladly at this time have persuaded Francis to agree to unite his great flourishing Order of Poor Brothers, and the much smaller company of Dominican Friars, thus to form one Order in the

Church. But to this, Francis, it is needless to say, would not agree. This was the wish also of Ugolini and the authorities at Rome. Dominic, always ready to consult and obey the will of the Pope, was looked upon as an obedient servant of the Roman Catholic Church. Favours were shown him and privileges accorded to him. Francis wanted none of these gifts, but he was more and more made to feel that in various ways the Roman Prelates were on the watch for every occasion on which they might thwart his aims and destroy his freedom of action.

It was at this great Chapter that the plan of sending out Franciscan missions to distant countries was set on foot. Certain 'ministers' were chosen from among the Friars to act as leaders and managers of these various missions. Francis found that it was impossible for him to undertake any longer the supervision of the whole Order. This scheme for extending their missionary work was a fresh proof of the increasing power of the Franciscan Order, and added to the uneasiness of Ugolini and the authorities at Rome.

Now we come to the beginning of great changes and troubles for Francis. The time was at hand when he could no longer carry out his ideal, and when even the ideal which he had tried to keep so clearly in view became clouded. The voice within him which he had always trusted seemed to speak less clearly because of the interference and opposi-

tion he encountered. Yet, to the very end, the story of his life is beautiful.

The first change to be mentioned is that which naturally followed the sudden extension of the Franciscan Order. Great numbers of men joined themselves to the Brotherhood, who proved very different in character from the earnest, faithful disciples who first followed Francis. Some of them soon began to be discontented with their humble, hard-working lot. They began to think with envy of the great Abbeys of the Benedictines, and other flourishing Orders, that had so many possessions and were under the rule and favour of Rome. Others, among the new Friars, had, before their conversion by Saint Francis, studied in the Universities of Europe, and they longed to use the culture they had received. Like Dominic, they were powerful in argument and able to convert men to their views in theology. To go out into the world merely as bare-footed preachers of repentance and of a Christ-like life did not satisfy their ambition.

Cardinal Ugolini became the willing ally of such malcontents. He perceived that to encourage dissatisfaction among the Friars might be one way in which he could bring about the changes he wanted to make in the Franciscan Order, and he used every chance to foment the discord. All this he did in his zeal for the Church; and the same motive led him to urge Francis to make alterations

in his Rule, so that life might be less rigorous for his followers. He pressed Francis to consult the educated men who had joined his Brotherhood and advised him to give way to the views which their experience led them to hold.

These suggestions, and others of similar character, were made gently, for Ugolini possessed great tact and caution. Francis was so humble-minded that the suggestion that he had usurped too much power pained him deeply. He would have lost all confidence in himself, in consequence, but for the firm belief that he had been divinely called to his work, and that the ideals which he had hitherto tried to realise and taught to others were not the conceptions of his own mind, but inspirations straight from God.

Francis was so simple-minded and true-hearted that he never for a moment suspected his friend of any double motive. Though greatly grieved by Ugolini's words, he would not let them cast any shadow over their friendship, yet he firmly withstood all the Cardinal's arguments. When the next Chapter was held at Portiuncula a remarkable scene took place. Ugolini attended the meeting, and in his presence Francis spoke solemnly to the assembled Brothers in these words.

'My Brothers, the Lord has called me into the ways of simplicity and humility. In them he has shown me the truth for myself and those who desire to believe and follow me. Do not, there-

fore, speak to me of the Rule of St. Benedict, of St. Augustine, of St. Bernard, or of any other, but solely of that which God in His mercy has seen fit to show me, and of which He has told me that He would by its means make a new covenant with the world, and He does not will that we should have any other. . . But by your learning and your wisdom God will bring you to confusion.'

We are told that Ugolini listened in silence, astonished at the resolute words and manner of Francis. The great Cardinal marvelled that this poor man of Assisi could withstand the favour and privileges which the Church was ready to grant him, if he were only submissive. Ugolini did not calculate on the strength which is given to those who are 'obedient to the heavenly vision.'

As the wandering preacher went on his mission about Italy he found Bishops in different places who were inclined to be unfriendly to him. His simple words, which came straight out of a heart filled with a sense of God's presence everywhere, had power to collect crowds of listeners about him. He was looked upon as an intruder by the great Churchmen who possessed no such influence. Yet, when they came into personal contact with him they were impressed by the child-like simplicity and devotion with which he tried to live and love like Christ. For example, one day he arrived at the town of Isola, and a great congrega-

tion gathered in the market-place. The Bishop would not permit any sermon to be given. To put an end to his interview with Francis he said angrily, 'It is enough for them that *I* preach to the people!'

Francis, with his usual courtesy and gentleness, withdrew, and went humbly on his way. But, in less than an hour's time, the wrathful Bishop found the brown-cloaked Brother in his presence again. Francis could not leave the waiting people without the spiritual food they were ready to receive from him. 'My Lord,' he said, 'if a father sends his son out at one door, there is nothing for him but to return by another.' The gentle, earnest pleading which followed these words was so effective that the Bishop exclaimed, his jealousy and anger quite overcome, 'Thou and all thy Brethren shall have a general License to preach through my diocese.'

In the year 1219 a new crusade was proclaimed by the Pope, and bands of crusaders from various parts of Europe were making their way to the East. Once more, Francis felt within him a call to try to carry his message of peace and goodwill across the sea. He was convinced that if he could only make a Christian of the Sultan, who owned the Holy Sepulchre, all motive for the crusades would be ended, and the terrible bloodshed of Christian hosts and Saracens would cease. Ugolini encouraged him in this scheme, though, for some

time of late, it had been his habit to urge Francis to confine his missionary labours to Italy.

One may suppose that Francis, who was so utterly true himself, trusted his friend entirely, and believed that he would keep the promise he had made to protect the Franciscan Order, and give his support to it in time of need. At all events, he was encouraged by the Cardinal's advice, and he made preparations for setting out on his dangerous and difficult mission to Syria. Before he left Italy he appointed two Vicars to govern the Order during his absence ; to hold the Chapters at Portiuncula ; and attend to the spiritual needs of the Brethren throughout Italy. They promised faithfully to obey the Rule during his absence; and Francis set sail for the East, prepared to undergo martyrdom, if only thus he could bring peace on earth.

It would be a long story to read of all his experiences in that mission which are recounted in history and legend. He set forth to enter upon it with the confidence which only perfect trust in God and belief that he was about his duty could give. The Sultan Kamel was encamped on one of the banks of the river Nile, and had offered a large reward to any one who would bring him the head of a Christian invader. Francis and his companion, after landing at Damietta, a seaport town besieged by the crusading army, travelled on foot towards the Sultan's camp. He went on

his way, singing, at times, as was his custom, and the words he most frequently chose were those of the twenty-third Psalm:

'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil.'

As the trembling Brother who accompanied him listened to the glorious voice, he too gained courage. The travellers saw two sheep cropping the scanty grass on their sandy path. Francis pointed to them, saying: 'My brother, trust in the Lord, for in us is fulfilled these words of the Gospel, "Behold I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves."' His confidence was soon to be put to the test. A party of hostile Arabs overtook them. 'I am a Christian; take me to your Lord,' said Francis, and wonderful to relate the two Friars lived to enter the Sultan's presence.

No doubt an interpreter was needed as Francis, in obedience to command, told how he had been sent by God, and not by man, to tell the Sultan and his people the belief that Christians held. What was it that touched the heart of the dreaded Pagan ruler as he listened to the preacher who had come to him on foot, and unprotected? Surely it was the power of the character of Francis, that wonderful personal influence which had prevailed with Pope Innocent III., and had changed daring robbers among the Apennine mountains into faithful members of the

Franciscan Brotherhood. We are told that the Sultan was filled with reverence for the strange, bare-footed preacher, and pressed him to take up his abode in the camp.

Could it be, Francis would perhaps ask himself joyfully, that the way was already opening for him to make a Christian of the enemy of the cross. He was treated with continued kindness by the Sultan, who offered to heap gifts upon him, none of which, as we can well believe, were accepted. But as time passed, Francis found, to his deep sorrow, that he could not convert the Saracens. This being the case, there was no object for his tarrying in the camp. A safe conduct was given to him by which he might travel where he liked, and he made his way to the army of Crusaders. Then he was among Christians again; nevertheless, his sadness increased, for there was little sign of the spirit of Christ among them.

The crusading army won the siege of Damietta. When they entered the city they found in it piles of dead bodies killed by the pestilence which, as is so often the case, had followed on the track of the war, and in the midst the conquerors fought each other for the treasures they could carry away. 'All these scenes of terror, cruelty, greed,' says his biographer Sabatier, 'caused him (St. Francis) profound horror. The "human beast" was let loose. The apostle's voice could no more make itself heard in the midst of the

clamour than that of a life-saver over a raging ocean.'[1]

Francis had failed in his purpose of putting an end to the war. It is known that wearied and troubled, with strength failing, he set out for the Holy Land. Nothing, however, is recorded of this part of his journey in the East.

[1] Life of St. Francis of Assisi, by Paul Sabatier, p. 231.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BEGINNING OF TROUBLES.

OUR story now takes us back to Italy, in the year 1220, where grievous troubles were disturbing the Franciscan Brotherhood. Soon after Francis had sailed for the East, the two Vicars whom he had trusted to fill his place, broke the promises they had made, and began to make changes in his Rule. By these changes they gave certain 'Privileges' to the Brothers, which lessened the poverty and simplicity of their daily lives. They also multiplied fasts and ordinances, which were to be strictly observed, and thus tended to make religion among the Friars a matter of rites and ceremonies, instead of the simple, hearty love to God and man which was the beginning and end of the religion taught by Saint Francis.

They were all small changes, but they brought about a different *spirit* in the Brotherhood. And Ugolini permitted these innovations, and encouraged them.

The whole Order was disturbed, for there were

great numbers of the faithful followers of Francis who were indignant, foreseeing the peril which threatened the Brotherhood; and a messenger was despatched by these anxious Friars to seek for their spiritual Father, and bring him back to Italy. The eager Brother found him at a seaport in Syria, and Francis at once embarked for Venice.

Safely landed there, the news of his return spread quickly, and we are told that 'a long shout of joy went up from Italy,' where a rumour of his death had been circulated. One of his first acts was to send messengers to summon a special chapter at Portiuncula, in about two months' time, and to carry a letter to his friend, the Abbess Clara, to reassure her.

As he journeyed from Venice towards Assisi through the country where he had preached so constantly during his long mission in Central Italy, he was not only weary but very sad, for he soon began to see signs of the changes which had taken place during his long absence. We must not now picture him on foot, singing joyously, as he pursued his way. Sometimes, nearly worn out, he had to finish a day's journey mounted on an ass. The story of the troubles that befel him in the town of Bologna, before he crossed the Apennines into Umbria, will serve as an example of the other experiences in this homeward journey to Portiuncula.

There was a tumult in the streets of Bologna, for the nobles in the district were at war. Their

various retainers, shouting faction cries, were drawing their swords on their enemies, and the blood even of peaceable citizens was being shed. But hear what happened when Saint Francis entered the town. Wearied as he was, he made his way through the crowd to the square before the little palace, and as the news spread, from one man to another, that he was about to preach, swords were thrust into their sheaths, cries were silenced, and rich and poor, young and old, hurried to the square to find standing places. His theme was 'Angels, men, devils,' and he spoke of the spirit of Christ in which his hearers ought to live, of the peaceful alliances which should wipe out all enmities, and of the results which would then follow on the earth. So powerfully did his words come home to the listeners, that the nobles who were present forgot their disputes, and offered their hands to each other in token of friendship, while their rough serving men followed the example of their lords, and made peace. Men and women pressed closely after Francis, trying to come near enough to touch the border of his tunic.

But there is more to tell before we leave Bologna. A fine building, with signs of wealth and prosperity about it—the Monastery of the Brothers Minor—met his astonished gaze. 'What!' he cried. 'Is this the house of Christ's poor? Have the Brothers Minor such great and splendid places? I do not recognise this as a house of ours,

and I cannot acknowledge as my brethren those who live in it.'

The indignation and anger of one who was usually so gentle and courteous, terrified the Brothers who were living in the monastery. Saint Francis would not enter the place; but commanded all who were in it 'to quit the house, and leave to the rich the things which belonged to them.' Out came the Friars hurrying into the street, carrying down the sick who were among them. Matters were not much improved by the appearance of Ugolini upon the scene. The Cardinal happened to be in Bologna, at the consecration of a church. He assured Francis that the new house did not belong to the Franciscan Friars. He was its owner, and had permitted them the use of it.

This was only one instance among many that led Francis to fear that, in the course of time, his followers would cease to be faithful to their mission. His own ideal of this mission was as clear to him as ever. Monks had their own way of serving God in the cloister; but he had tried to mend the world by sending out into it humble, loving Friars, who should live the simplest, poorest lives in the midst of the haunts of unlettered, miserable men. His followers, by the imitation of Christ's life, of his love and helpfulness in poverty, were to bring back to the thought of the world that forgotten influence, and show forth again the beauty of love and holiness.

The later history of the Franciscan movement proves that these fears which were troubling Francis were not unfounded. But it is worth while here to look forward just four years in our story, and find an example, in the history of our own island, of the wonderful influence for good wrought by the Brothers Minor, who faithfully carried out the intentions of Saint Francis.

In the year 1224, when Henry III. was king of England, one of the chief events in his long reign was the 'Coming of the Friars.' We learn that in those days, 'the sediment of the town population was a dense slough of stagnant misery, squalor, famine, loathsome disease, and dull despair, such as the worst slums of London, Paris, or Liverpool know nothing of. Outside the city walls at Lynn and York and Bristol, in a filthy swamp at Norwich through which the drainage of the city trickled into a river never a foot lower than its banks, in a mere barn-like structure, with walls of mud, at Shrewsbury, in the "stinking alley" in London, the Minorites (Brothers Minor) took up their abode, and there they lived on charity, doing for the lowest the most menial offices, speaking to the poorest the words of hope, preaching to learned and simple such sermons, short, homely, fervent, and emotional, as the world had not heard for many a day.'[1]

The Friars had no possessions of their own;

[1] 'The Coming of the Friars,' by Dr. Jessop.

if they could not earn their living by work, they lived on the poor food that grateful persons gave them. Their homes were rude huts, like those of the wretched people round them. Their work was to tend the sick, comfort the broken-hearted, and turn the wicked from their sins. There were no churches where the outcasts herded, but the Friars preached to them the gospel of love, with the hopeful, joyous spirit that they had learned from St. Francis, and a new religious life was wakened in the land. Not only did numbers of men take the Friars' vows, but the Order of the Tertiaries sprang up in England, and carried that helpful, loving spirit into their homes and ordinary daily life.

Now we must turn back to the summer of the year 1220, when we left St. Francis at Bologna, sad and greatly puzzled by the disorders which were creeping into the affairs of the Brotherhood. With every sign that his old friendship for Francis was as warm as ever, Cardinal Ugolini begged him to come with him for a month to seek rest and refreshment of spirit in the beautiful forest of Camaldoli, which lies between Bologna and the Apennine mountains. Francis consented, but there was no rest for him in the forest. Ugolini used the opportunity for quiet intercourse to tell him not only of the discontent among the new Friars, but also that the missionaries who had been sent out after the

'Chapter of the Mats' at Portiuncula to Hungary and Germany, had been driven out of those countries with insults and persecutions, and had come back filled with bitterness.

This was sad news for Francis. Ugolini went on to point out that such troubles to the missionaries would be prevented, if only the Friars were provided with a Papal brief or letter from the Pope, to serve as a passport in places where, by reason of difference in language, they could not at first make themselves understood.

The Cardinal asked why Francis should expose his followers so needlessly to peril? With gentle reproaches he went on to say that the Church speaks in the name of God to men through the Pope, and that true humility on the part of Francis would lead him to ask the Pope's counsel and help in many ways, and to obey him as an obedient son of the Church. Day after day arguments were used by Ugolini to prove that a great association like the Franciscan Order must have precise regulations. Surely Francis, he argued, must often feel the difficulties of his post as Spiritual Father of so many thousands of followers. Could he not see that he was injuring the peace of the Church by his self-will?

Reproaches such as these could not fail to have a powerful effect on the mind of one who was so sensitive and humble as Francis. He began to fear that he had indeed made mistakes, and his once clear ideal became clouded.

One night he went in his great trouble to pray in the depths of the forest. As he prayed it seemed to him that an answer from God came into his soul. 'Poor little man,' the heavenly voice seemed to say, 'I govern the Universe. Thinkest thou I cannot overrule the concerns of thy Order?'

Perhaps, thought Francis, Ugolini was right, and he was relying too much on himself. His joyous confidence in his own plans was fast fading away, but his trust was still firm in God.

In his uncertainty he called to mind a dream in which he had seen a little hen trying in vain to spread her wings over her great brood. The interpretation which he gave to the dream was a very natural one, under the circumstances. He was the hen, and the chickens were the Friars. Was it not true that he had no longer power to rule over the Brotherhood and should seek another protector for them?

The Pope was then staying at Orvieto, within a short distance of the forest; and it came to pass that Francis sought for admission to his presence. This was granted. So was also his petition that the Pope would appoint an official intrusted with the future direction of the whole Franciscan Order. This office was assigned by the Pope to Ugolini. From this time, Sabatier tells us in his Life of St. Francis, 'a new era began in the relations of the Church and the Order, and the old simplicity gave way to ecclesiastical arrangements.'

Presently, a letter was issued by the Pope addressed to Brother Francis and the other Priors of the 'Brothers Minor.' This letter bore upon it the great Papal seal or 'Bulla,' which gave to all such documents the title of the 'Pope's Bulls.' It was the official recognition of the Brotherhood, which was thenceforth to conform more and more to the ways of other established Orders.

In the last week of September, 1220, the plain before Portiuncula was again the meeting-place of Friars who came to attend the Chapter. St. Francis was there to meet them. But the words of their once joyous leader called forth tears and lamentations from his old companions. They were told that their Spiritual Father could no longer remain at the head of his great family, and he appointed one of the Brothers, Pietro di Catana, to act as 'Minister-General' under Cardinal Ugolini. Now Pietro di Catana was a Doctor of Laws and a man of noble birth, who could rule the great Brotherhood firmly, according to plans laid down by the Cardinal.

At the close of the Chapter, Francis left Portiuncula and went to one of the little caves, or hermitages, on the Umbrian hills, many of which still bear the names of St. Francis and his disciples. There Brother Leo, and others of his earliest band of followers, often came to him in reverent sympathy with his great sorrow. Indeed, he was heart-broken because his clear inspirations had forsaken

him. The constant interviews with Ugolini had left him a prey to doubts and conflicts in his own mind. So long as, without interference from men, he could look to God and his conscience for light and help, all had seemed clear to him. Now he was worn out and ill in both mind and body.

The Pope laid a heavy task upon him. This was the preparation of a new Rule for the Brotherhood. He gave many months to the painful consideration of this matter. It is enough to say about it here that by the time it was made known among the Friars, owing to the changes made in it by the Pope and Cardinal Ugolini, very little of the spirit of St. Francis was left in it.

After the year 1221 changes in the Order went on more rapidly. It is sad to think how Francis tried in vain, by letters to the Friars and by messages to them, to keep the ideal of the Christ-like life and the helping spirit alive among his old companions as it had once existed among them. At times, it seemed to him as if his own example would be all that would be left of the results of his years of preaching. He foresaw in his sleepless nights some glimmering of what would really take place. And it *did* come to pass, after his death, that the Minister-General of the Order was no longer the spiritual Father to the Brethren, who set to them the example of a loving, Christ-like life. He became the servant of the Pope. The Friars *did* cease in time to be the lowly Brothers, who, with

joyous spirits, went about to help and comfort wherever there was need. Instead of spending their lives in helping the poor and oppressed, they became the confidential advisers of the wealthy, and found influential posts in the families of rank. To beg became a privilege and mark of the Order; honest work ceased to be considered one of the joys of life; and the Brothers forgot the teaching of St. Francis that *because* they served it was no disgrace to receive a gift of food.

The name of Brother Elias of Cortona now comes into our story. He was a prominent citizen of Assisi when, years before the time about which we are now reading, the influence of St. Francis first led him to join the Brotherhood. He was by nature an ambitious, domineering man; but this new influence brought out better qualities in him, and when Pietro di Catana died, within twelve months after his appointment as Minister-General of the Order, Francis chose Elias as successor to Pietro.

The influence of Ugolini, however, under which Elias now came, called forth a very different side of his character. Ugolini found him a man after his own heart, and Elias soon showed himself anxious to mould the Franciscan Order according to the pattern set forth by the Cardinal. The affairs of the Order passed more and more into the hands of Elias, and when a Chapter-General was held in 1221 at Portiuncula, owing to the in-

creased bodily weakness of St. Francis, it was through the voice of Elias that the assembled Brothers received the messages Francis wished to give to them. This was a grievous trouble to great numbers of the Friars in whose faithful hearts their spiritual Father still held his old place.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE MOUNTAIN TOP.

THE streams which form the sources of the two rivers, the Tiber and the Arno, flow through a lovely district in Italy, on which the sheltering Apennine mountains look down. The Camaldoli forest lies there, and vineyards, and corn fields, and quiet villages nestle on green hill sides. The grand peak of Mount Verna rises to the height of 4000 feet among the mountain ranges. It will be remembered that this was the solitary mountain which was given by Count Orlando of Chiusi to Francis and his followers to serve as a peaceful retreat. Its steep slopes were covered with pines, larches, oaks and beeches; and a narrow path led up through these woods to a plateau or table-land on the mountain-top, from which wide views of glorious country lying far below were to be seen.

One day in the year 1224 a little company of men in the brown habits of the Franciscan friars began to make this toilsome ascent. They were

the Brothers Leo, Masseo, and Angelo—three of the Friars who were most beloved by Francis. They are always mentioned in the story of the last year of his life as 'the three companions' because they were his constant caretakers after his strength had begun to fail fast.

They were conducting Francis to the top of Mount Verna in the hope that perfect rest and quiet might restore his lost health. He was riding on an ass led by a peasant, who seems to have been a stranger to the travellers. For, as they climbed the steep path the peasant broke the silence, and looking with great interest at the wearied rider he said to him—'Is it really true that you are Brother Francis of Assisi? If this is so then apply yourself to be as good as folk say you are that they may not be deceived in their expectations.'

The speech of the outspoken peasant seemed to waken new hope in the sad heart of St. Francis. With characteristic humility he bowed his head to the man, and thanked him for his words. Amid the failure of his plan and grievous disappointment in regard to his Brotherhood there was still something worth living for—the building up of a Christ-like character within himself. This had been one aim in his life and it still remained to him. The birds came fluttering about him singing. 'Ah!' he said joyfully, turning to his companions 'It is surely pleasing to the Lord that we live here for a time in this solitary mountain, since our

brothers and sisters, the birds, show such delight at our coming.'

Count Orlando's castle stood on a spur of the Apennines just below the Verna. The Count heard that St. Francis was on his way up the mountain path and he summoned his men at arms to go with him to meet the Saint at the summit. With their warlike weapons they cut off branches of the trees and cleared away brushwood to make a hut for Francis beneath a beech tree, while a stone's throw off they built up a larger shelter for the three companions.

The count told them that during their stay on Mount Verna they would always find food at the Castle which they could carry up for themselves and St. Francis, and then he and his band withdrew and the evening shadows settled down upon the mountain top.

In course of time the watchful Brothers saw their dear leader rise up from his hut under the beech tree, and they followed him deeper into the wood to a cave overhanging the mountain side. There he turned and bade them leave him, but Leo might bring bread and water to the entrance of the cave each night and morning.

One of the three companions has left in writing the story of the events that followed. From this story we may picture the solitary man, whose life for so many years had been spent in the service of his fellow-creatures, cutting himself off from the

world that he might be quite alone with God. Day after day, the sun rose and shone over the beautiful plain below him, and, weak with illness and fasting, he seemed to himself to be lifted far up above things of sense into the spiritual world, for his soul was wrapped in prayer and in contemplation of the life of Christ which he had so earnestly tried to follow, and to teach other people to follow.

At last, in that lonely cave when day after day had passed unnoticed, a beautiful vision seemed to rise before him of the face of Christ as he had seen it years before in the Chapel of St. Damian. Nor was this all. We are told that a great longing came upon him to suffer even unto death as Christ had done, if by so doing he might serve God in the world; and that in this deep spiritual ecstacy there appeared upon his hands and feet the 'stigmata.'[1]

By many who knew nothing of the wonderful power of the mind over the body this story of the stigmata will be put on one side and placed among the legends which have gathered round the history of St. Francis. Yet perhaps even so some may still find a beautiful meaning in it. Surely, it reminds us of the truth that our real selves are the hidden, living souls within that think, and love and will and powerfully control at all times, and help to fashion, the outer body that passes away at death.

[1] Marks of the wounds caused by the nails driven into the hands and feet of Christ at the Crucifixion.

Life was not yet at an end for St. Francis, and the world with all its sins and sorrows called him back again to it from the mountain top. He summoned the three companions and they set forth down the steep path through the wood, leading the horse which had been sent by the Count to carry St. Francis. 'Farewell, dear mountain of God!' he said, as a turn in the road at last hid the beautiful summit from his sight—'abide in peace—we shall never see one another more.'

As the little procession passed through the villages on the banks of the river Tiber on the way to Portiuncula the people came out with joyful cries to greet St. Francis. A day or two later he was about his old work, going from village to village in Southern Umbria, with feverish haste sometimes holding services in three or four villages in one day, always followed by the three companions. The thought that was uppermost in his mind was that he must work while it was day. He was threatened with blindness, and the beautiful world was growing daily more and more dim. At last darkness came upon him and he could not tell night from day.

Cardinal Ugolini heard the news and despatched messengers from Rieti where he was staying with the Pope, for a time, inviting Francis to the Court, that he might have treatment from the skilful physicians who had come there in the Pope's train. But at present Francis longed

for a very different kind of help; and at the urgent request of the Abbess Clara the Brothers carried him to the hut in the olive grove that surrounded the Chapel of St. Damian that he might be cared for by the friend whose words had always power to comfort him. The hut was made of reeds, and rats and mice that infested the old garden ran over his bed at night and deprived him of sleep. As he lay awake hour after hour, weak, and blind, his thoughts sometimes turned to the old days when in his youth and strength he had built up the ruined walls and gone about Assisi singing joyfully in his eagerness to work for God. But when Clara was near him her words and voice drove away all despondent thoughts. 'A single sunbeam' he would say cheerfully, 'is enough to drive away many shadows.' He grew by degrees more like his old self. The poor ladies in the convent used to hear him singing as he lay in his shelter among the olive trees; and though he was blind and ill his joyousness began to return, and he often spoke gratefully of the beauty of the world which perhaps he might never see again.

It was while he lay thus in darkness that he composed a hymn of praise which is known as 'the Canticle of the Sun,' together with a chant to which it was to be sung. He repeated it again and again till the Brothers sitting by his bed knew it by heart, and he left it with them as a message to the world to remind men to love, and be thankful for,

all the beauty with which God had surrounded them.

At times, he even looked forward to his recovery, and planned that he and some of the Friars would go about from village to village preaching and singing the Hymn of the Sun. The crowds of people would gather round as they had been always used to do, and he would say to them, 'We are God's jugglers. We want to be paid for our sermon and our song. Our payment shall be that you persevere in penitence.'

'Is it not a fact,' he would say, 'that the servants of God are really like jugglers, intended to revive the hearts of men and lead them into spiritual joy?'

Here is a translation of the Canticle. Let us picture, as we read it, the cell among the trees, and St. Francis singing it with his beautiful voice as he lay blind and helpless.

'O most high, almighty, good Lord God, to thee belong praise, glory, honour and all blessing!

'Praised be my Lord God with all his creatures, and specially our brother the sun, who brings us the day and who brings us the light; fair is he and shines with a very great splendour; O Lord, he signifies to us thee!

'Praised be my Lord for our sister the moon, and for the stars, the which he has set clear and lovely in heaven.

'Praised be my Lord for our brother the wind, and for air and cloud, calms and all weather by the which thou upholdest life in all creatures.

'Praised be my Lord for our sister the water, who is very serviceable unto us, and humble, precious and clean.

'Praised be my Lord for our brother fire, through whom thou givest light in the darkness; and he is bright and pleasant and very mighty and strong.

'Praised be my Lord for our mother the earth, the which doth sustain us and keep us, and bringeth forth divers fruits and flowers of many colours and grass.

'Praised be my Lord for our sister the death of the body from which no man escapeth. Woe to him who dieth in mortal sin. Blessed are they who are found walking by thy most holy will, for the second death shall have no power to do them harm.

'Praise ye and bless the Lord, and give thanks to him, and serve him with great humility.[1]

In the month of September, 1225, Francis was conveyed by the Brothers to Rieti that the Pope's physicians might operate upon his eyes. We will pass over his sufferings, which were very severe, and borne with most wonderful courage and patience, and we will not linger long over the story of the following winter months. There was intense excitement in Italy, especially in Central Italy, concerning him. The people in the cities and villages where he was personally known would travel on foot long distances for the chance of seeing him when he was carried from one place

[1] Translated by Matthew Arnold. See 'Essays in Criticism,' First series.

to another, and during that time of excitement, when the dread of hearing that he was dead oppressed men's minds, fresh legends grew up and were repeated with additions by one person to another.

The superstition which was so universal in the thirteenth century is shown in the eagerness with which the people of Italy, even in his life time, sought for relics of the simple-minded, loving man who had gone about ministering among them. We hear, too, of the fierce rivalry with which certain towns sought that the saint might end his days within their walls.

CHAPTER X.

'WELCOME, SISTER DEATH.'

WITH the Spring days of 1226 Francis revived a little, but only a glimmer of sight returned to him. The people of Assisi were impatiently demanding that St. Francis should be carried there to die. He himself longed to be back in Portiuncula and near again to the places endeared to him by so many memories. His own wishes were over-ruled, however, and it came to pass that an escort of armed men, sent from Assisi, conveyed him to the Bishop's palace there, and the 'three companions' were installed as his caretakers.

Guards were placed at all the approaches to the palace, so careful were the authorities to keep safely the precious body of their saint—but there was no care taken to secure his peace of mind. As he lay in the palace chamber, anxiously inquiring about affairs at Portiuncula, he heard of further changes in the Order and in the lives of the Friars—of disorder everywhere and confusion in the Rule. This news awakened afresh his anxiety, and filled him with agonies of grief as he thought

of his lost ideal. The three companions could not keep the distressing reports from him.

Worn out with fever, and, at times, delirious, he would cry aloud—'Oh! that I could once again go to the Chapter General, I would show them what my will is!' Sometimes the Brothers heard him murmuring in his dreams, 'We must begin to create again a new family who will not forget humility, who will go and serve lepers as in the old times, and put themselves always not merely in words, but in reality, below all men.' When the fever and delirium passed away his thoughts were bent on finding ways in which he could help to restore those who had gone astray. He busied himself in dictating letters of advice to the Brothers, praying them to live simply, and not to set their wishes on earthly goods, and to obey the voice of the Son of God and keep his commandment with all their hearts.

And now for one more story. It recounts his last act of loving service in Assisi. A quarrel arose between the Bishop and the Podesta, or Governor, of the city. The dispute waxed fiercer, and no one attempted to interfere. There even seemed a chance that the people might take sides, and civil war follow. Francis had served as peacemaker once before for his native town—now he would again fill the office.

And first, he added this new verse to his 'Canticle of the Sun':—

'Be praised, Lord, for those who forgive for love
of Thee,
And bear trials and tribulations;
Happy they who persevere in peace,
By Thee, Most High, shall they be crowned.'

This done, he sent to beg the Governor and some of the chief citizens to assemble on the Square before the Bishop's Palace. The Governor, who loved St. Francis heartily, for his sake betook himself to the Square. The Bishop also was ready to fulfil what was, perhaps, the last wish of the dying saint, and went down out of his palace to meet the Governor.

Picture the strange scene in the old City Square—the two enemies facing each other with haughty mien and filled with angry thoughts, the wondering company gathered round waiting to see what was to take place! And think of the beautiful unseen influence that brought about the change of which you will hear—the influence of St. Francis, the lover of peace and good-will, who lay slowly dying in the palace above!

Two Brothers in their brown tunics, bare-footed, came forward into the open space before the Bishop and the Governor, and one of them said, 'Brother Francis has made to the praise of God a hymn to which he prays you to listen piously.' Then they began to sing together the hymn of Brother Sun, with its new verse, which was so applicable to the occasion. Sabatier thus describes what followed:

'The Governor listened, standing in an attitude of profound attention, copiously weeping, for he dearly loved the blessed Francis. When the singing was ended—"Know, in truth," he said, "that I desire to forgive the Lord Bishop, that I wish and ought to look upon him as my Lord, for if one had even assassinated my brother I should be ready to pardon the murderer." With these words he threw himself at the Bishop's feet and said, "I am ready to do whatsoever you would, for the love of Our Lord Jesus Christ and his servant Francis." Then the Bishop, taking him by the hand, lifted him up, and said, "With my position it would become me to be humble, but since I am naturally too quick to wrath thou must pardon me."'[1]

Sabatier adds that the 'unexpected reconciliation was immediately looked upon as miraculous, and increased still more the reverence of the people of Assisi for their fellow-citizen.'

Soon after this event the sufferings of Francis increased, and he became unable to move. It seemed to him that he must give up his ardent longing to see St. Damian and Portiuncula again. 'Never forsake Portiuncula,' he said to the Brothers who stood beside him, 'the place is truly sacred; it is the House of God.'

Hearing he had not long to live he sent farewell messages to the Abbess Clara, and spoke thus to the little company of Friars who had gathered

[1] 'Life of St. Francis of Assisi,' by Paul Sabatier, p. 329.

together in his room :—'Remain all of you in the fear of God ; abide always united to Christ. Great trials are in store for you, and tribulation draws nigh. Happy are they who persevere as they have begun, for there will be scandals and divisions among you. As for me, I am going to the Lord my God. Yes, I have the assurance that I am going to Him whom I have served.' Then he stretched out his hands with a joyful look upon his face, and cried, 'Welcome, Sister Death!'

We are told that his last days were of radiant beauty, and an old chronicler says, 'He went to meet death singing.' The Brothers Angelo and Leo, forcing back all signs of their grief, sang to him at his request, and the palace rang unceasingly with the hymns. His own voice was strangely strong, and when he was tired the Brothers sang again.

After all, his great wish was to be fulfilled. While he thus waited joyfully for death the faithful Brothers carried him to Portiuncula. As they were crossing the plain among the olive yards he often asked them what part of their journey they had reached, and when at length they told him that they had come to the spot where Assisi lay full in view, he told them to set the litter on the ground, and with his face turned to the city he lifted up his hands and blessed it.

They carried him into the hut at Portiuncula. The fresh air of the neighbouring woods renewed his strength for a little while, and he was able to

dictate fresh messages to the Brotherhood, which were preserved under the title of his 'Will.' He commended also the Abbess Clara and the other poor ladies of St. Damian to the care of the Brotherhood. And now the 3rd day of October, in the year 1226, was drawing to a close.

'Alas! good Father,' said one of the sorrowful Brothers, unable to keep back the expression of his grief. 'Your children are going to lose you. Think of the orphans you are leaving, and forgive them all their faults. Give to them all, present and absent, the joy of your holy benediction.'

'See,' were his last words in reply, 'God is calling me. I forgive all my Brothers, present and absent, their offences and faults, and absolve them according to my power. Tell them so, and bless them all in my name.'

Some bread was brought; he broke it and gave it to them. 'And thus,' says his biographer, 'in the poor cabin of the Portiuncula, without an altar and without a priest, was celebrated the Lord's Supper.' A few words from the Gospel of St. John were read, and then all was silent in the hut. The sun was setting, and the golden light shone on his sightless eyes as he passed away in perfect peace. As the Brothers bent over him trying to catch some last sign of lingering life, a host of larks lighted on the thatch of the cell and broke into joyful songs.

THE END.

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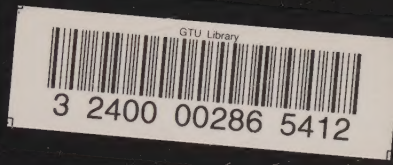

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